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New Theatre Aspen play 'Vices' tells a love story through dance

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Theatre Aspen premiered 'Vices: A Love Story' this past Thursday, the company's third and final production of the summer season, and the musical can best be described as a visually and sonorously stunning work-in-progress.

Unlike 'Becky's New Car,' which had the pull of Broadway star Sandy Duncan, or 'Annie,' whose songs rank among musical theater's most recognizable, 'Vices' was a bit of a risk for the small theater troupe. Firstly, it's a relatively new play (2009), and Theatre Aspen has had a history of showcasing tried-and-true productions. But also the storytelling is unique in that the central drama unfolds mainly through dance.

'Vices' follows dancers Matt and Sam (played with fluidity and expressiveness by Samantha Harvey and Matthew Steffens) and their four vocal on-stage counterparts. The audience explores the dance couple's relationship from the very beginning through vignettes, each of which highlight the pitfalls, or vices, that can ruin a relationship — from chocolate and smoking and working out to plastic surgery and drugs.

'I saw a version of the show in Florida, and was just so intrigued by the storytelling through dance,' said Theatre Aspen Artistic Director Paige Price. 'And I'm really thrilled that we took a risk and did something brand new. I'm really proud of the team for putting this together.'

The show is at its best while watching the dancers, whose effortless motion and intensity often distract from the fact that there is an excellent live band on the stage, and listening to the singers, whose theater credits are only eclipsed by their vocal talent, belt out catchy tunes with bravado and flair.

But if the play is lacking in any category it's in the clarity of storytelling, especially at the start. But after four or five songs it is fairly easy to catch up.

'The relationship [between the dance couple] needs to be more fully flushed out,' Price said, 'especially at the beginning. And there are a lot of moments that are fantasy that are blown up into big production numbers, and moments that are more real. And I admit that there needs to be a clearer distinction between those two.'

Fortunately for the writers, though not Aspen audiences, they'll have the opportunity to make changes to the storytelling layout in future productions. They've been in town watching the show and already are prepping changes for future iterations of 'Vices.'

And the need for tweaking the storytelling isn't the only thing they've learned. There are frequently images, which often provide a little comic relief, projected on the back wall of the stage. (An audience favorite was the Shake Weight promo during the workout vice sequence.) Initially the projected images were going to be on four screens that moved around the stage, but they needed more room for the dancers so they put it on the back wall. They eventually pushed it even farther back to give the dancers more room.

“Every moment that doesn't work in a production is an opportunity to take it to the next level next time,” Price said. “And sometimes when you solve a problem you create another problem, but that is part of the process.”

Despite the few faults, “Vices” is ultimately a success. It is “American Idol” meets “So You Think You Can Dance,” according to Price. And between the live band, the dancers, the singers, and the projected images, it comes off as a multi-media performance piece that's quite unlike anything else going on in Aspen — which is a good thing.

“We've had a great reaction from the audience so far,” Price said. “And I think that's because people here enjoy trying new things.”

“Vices: A Love Story” runs through Aug. 20 at the Hurst Theatre in Rio Grande Park. For more information on Theatre Aspen, visit [www.theatraspen.org](http://www.theatraspen.org) [1]. To purchase tickets, visit [www.aspenshowtix.com](http://www.aspenshowtix.com) [2].

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