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On stage: It's Picasso vs. Einstein

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PAMELA MORSE
For The Birmingham News

"Picasso at the Lapin Agile" is not nearly so off-putting as its title may suggest.

Judging from the small crowd at Tuesday's opening night, Impressionism and French don't have mass appeal in Birmingham. What the masses may not realize is that this play was written by that wild and crazy guy who's never been short on popularity, comedian Steve Martin.

The absurdist comedy examines what might have happened in a Paris bar in 1904 if the young Pablo Picasso had matched wits with Albert Einstein.

The two meet just as Einstein is about to publish what he refers to as his "book," "The Special Theory of Relativity." Picasso is on the verge of moving from his "blue period" into the cubist style he made into a movement.

A relative newcomer to the Birmingham theater scene, The Magic City Actors Theatre offers "Picasso" as its first play, having produced only two musicals since its creation last year. "Picasso" bodes well for MCAT's foray into drama because it is well-rehearsed, meticulously staged and lovingly directed.

Travis Hawkins plays an exuberant and charming Einstein, while Santiago Sosa creates a more brooding Picasso. The entire cast performed smoothly on Tuesday, with especially accomplished turns from Howard Green and Ginny S. Loggins as the barkeepers.

The performances were at times marred by an overindulgence in accents, which made some lines unintelligible. Christophe Nicolet offered a convincing French twist, but he was very difficult to understand.

And you will want to hear every word. Martin's script is smart, fast and funny. But there's no real physical comedy here - the laughs are in the ideas. Martin juxtaposes the theory of relativity with romance, cubism with ambition, lust with philosophy.

Lest you think this play is too high-minded, sit back and wait for a surprise visitor from later in the 20th century, who brings a bit of rock'n' roll to the dueling intellects of the main characters.

So forget the title. Think of it as the two really smart guys at a cool bar picking up cute girls.

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