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Dazzled by setting, puzzled by the lead

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Sur-priiiiize! Our hero, young Francis Geminiani, has returned to his dad's South Philadelphia rowhouse after earning a music degree in composition, from Harvard University. All of a sudden, two Harvard pals pop in, unannounced, to celebrate his 21st birthday.

The two buddies, a Boston-Brahmin brother and sister, are floored by South Philadelphia. For his part, Louis is astonished that they've come. It's the plot of the play Gemini, which the smart, versatile Albert Innaurato wrote and which became a long runner on Broadway after its 1977 debut.

Innaurato's send-up of his hometown neighborhood was not just a matter of scrappy South Philadelphia versus preppy New England; Francis is, to be generous, sexually distressed, and Gemini is an early coming-of-gay-age explorer.

Now set to song, Gemini, The Musical opened Saturday night in a world-premiere run at the Prince Music Theater, and you would have to be a hard-shell naysayer not to have a good time seeing it. Even with its flaws, which are major and confounding, the musical is charming, funny, and masterfully staged by Douglas C. Wager, the Prince's director in residence, on a swell set by Tobin Ost.

What's more, the music by Charles Gilbert, who heads the musical theater program at the University of the Arts, fits right into the script; the lyrics - Gilbert and Innaurato teamed - are often a stitch. Who can resist a South Philadelphia papa singing about the concrete in his backyard, or the mouthy, free-and-easy lady next door who celebrates because she has been let off a homicide charge?

Or, in the sweetest moment, an addle-headed, asthmatic neighbor boy whose obsession is public transit, offering an ode to an unnamed SEPTA? "The trolleys," he sings with great fragility, "they are very beautiful," and you just want to hug the nearest subway surface car.

Amid this sits a poorly written character - the main one, Francis himself, played by Barry James, who, in addition to suffering a puzzling script, is also misdirected or miscast. Your two friends materialize to celebrate with you, and you shun rudely through the entire show? Not likely, even if you have an extensive sexual-identity problem and your pals are its flashpoints.

James is a fine singer whose acting, at least here, is not sufficiently flexible to overcome the character's single dimension. James' physical moves are too sharp, his smile too dumb, his portrayal too flat. He plays out Francis' inner conflict with an array of facial extremes that makes him appear to suffer from a potentially explosive buildup of gas.

This stands out because the rest of the cast is so right: the delightfully base Bunny whom Linda Hart creates; Todd Buonopane's Herschel, with his SEPTA fixation; talented Anne DeSalvo, who plays both the gal-pal of Francis' dad and the Maria Callas whom Francis summons for help; an everyman's Robert Picardo, who played Francis on Broadway and here portrays his dad. As the Harvard pals, Jillian Louis and Jeremiah B. Downes are the ideal mixture of puzzled-by-Francis and intrigued-by-South-Philly.

South Philly is great for the play (location! location! location!), but Francis is not (motive! motive! motive!). This is never more clear than in the last five minutes, when the entire tone shifts, everyone gets happy, nothing is resolved, and the father shouts: "I think they're gonna make it!"

I'd make a big-money South Philly street bet that no one in the audience can explain just who is going to make it, and how. Let alone why.

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Gemini, The Musical

Book by Albert Innaurato, music by Charles Gilbert, lyrics by both. Directed by Douglas C. Wager, choreographed by Nancy Berman Kantra, sets by Tobin Ost, costumes by Andr D. Harrington, lighting by Troy A. Martin-O'Shia, sound by Nick Kourtides. Presented by Prince Music Theater.

The cast: Barry James (Francis), Jillian Louis (Judith), Jeremiah B. Downes (Randy), Anne DeSalvo (Lucille), Linda Hart (Bunny), Robert Picardo (Fran), Todd Buonopane (Herschel).

Playing at Prince Music Theater, 1412 Chestnut St., through Oct. 31. Tickets: \$38 to \$52. Information: 215-569-9700 or www.princemusictheater.org.

Caption:
MARK GARVIN

The musical, set in South Philly like the original play, features (from left) Anne DeSalvo, Robert Picardo, Barry James, Jillian Louis, Todd Buonopane, Jeremiah B. Downes and Linda Hart.PHOTO

Memo:
Review Theater

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