

“The Bridges of Madison County” is a mature musical about desire versus duty

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"The Bridges of Madison County" photos by Lianne Schoenwiesner Spotlights Photography

SOPAC production is a serious musical of

beauty and power

The American Theatre Group, in residence at the [South Orange Performing Arts Center](#) (SOPAC), brings to its stage *The Bridges of Madison County*. Based on the novel by Robert James Waller, the musical's book is by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Marsha Norman. The score by Jason Robert Brown, combining elements of pop, opera, country, and folk, won the 2014 Tony Award. *The Bridges of Madison County* now makes its professional New Jersey debut. It is that rare thing: a serious musical of beauty and power. It deserves to be seen by the serious theatregoer.

It is the mid-60's in rural Iowa. Over the past 20 years, Francesca Johnson (Jennifer Ellis), an Italian war-bride, has resigned herself to being a farm wife and mother, putting away her youthful dreams of travel and art. When the rest of the family—husband Bud (Jared Bradshaw), rebellious son Michael (Alex Carr), and unsure daughter Carolyn (Courtney Martin)—head off to a national 4-H fair in Indianapolis, Francesca looks forward to four days to herself. Before her idyll can begin it is interrupted by photographer Robert Kincaid (Bryant Martin), sent to photograph the famed covered bridges in the county. His request for directions to the last bridge turns into a day's excursion extending to a home cooked dinner that evening. Over



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the course of the next day, Robert and Francesca become aware of growing feelings for each other, leading to a romantic night together. When Robert invites Francesca to come away with him, will she forsake her seemingly oblivious family for the chance to recapture her dreams?



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Under the guidance of director/choreographer Merete Muentner, the cast give strong, emotionally-grounded performances. Chief among them are Jennifer Ellis' superb portrayal of Francesca. Ms. Ellis captures the complete emotional spectrum of a woman given a chance to realize long-suppressed desires, giving a riveting performance. She captures the audience from

the opening number, "To Build a Home," holding them until the finale, "Always Better," a duet with Bryant Martin. Mr. Martin matches Ms. Ellis' performance as Robert, a loner who is content with the detachment his job provides until he finds himself entranced by Francesca. Excellent support is provided by Jared Bradshaw as Bud, deeply in love with his wife yet uncomfortable with displaying emotion; and Tait Ruppert and Deborah Tranelli as Charlie and Marge, the Johnson's neighbors, who provide a humorous counterbalance to the dramatic love story.

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Conductor Keith Levenson leads a compact orchestra of eight, just the right size and sound for what can be



considered a chamber piece. Bethanie Wampol's set design foregoes conventional scenery, utilizing various pieces of furniture to evoke place, except for two set pieces on movable platforms to indicate the Johnson's kitchen. She also makes use of beautifully designed rear projections to convey

location and the passage of time. Place and time are also provided by Douglas Macur's lighting design, while Janelle Berte's costumes evoke the American heartland of the mid-1960s.

An intimate musical with great emotional strength. A story of the conflict between romantic passions and familial responsibilities. A score to delight and echo in the heart. All of these are combined in *The Bridges of Madison County*, making this a show worth seeing. I encourage those with a serious interest in modern musical theatre to make the trip to [SOPAC](#) before this show's all-too-quick run is over.



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The Bridges of Madison County is presented by the American Theatre Group at the Leither Performance Hall at the [South Orange Performing Arts Center](#) through June 30, 2019. For tickets and information, go to [SOPACnow.org](#).



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