

ENTERTAINMENT



Ashlyn Lozano and Marvin Quijada share a romance that knows no earthly bounds in "The Dream King."

JOEL MAISONET

SILENCE IS GOLDEN

Life's a 'Dream' come true in an enchanting Teatro Vista production

BY JACK HELBIG
For the Sun-Times

What happens when you fall in love with someone who only exists in your dreams?

This is the question Chicago actor, writer and physical comedian Marvin Quijada asks in his beguiling 90-minute play, "The Dream King," receiving its world-premiere production at Teatro Vista.

"The Dream King" tells the story of Sam, a simple man who lives a nothing life. He lives alone. He has a boring job. Every evening he does the same things — eats dinner, watches TV, goes to bed. But every night, the moment he closes his eyes, he enters an amazing dream world full of fantastic creatures, created on a stage through a combination of projections, props, puppets and an array of costumed performers. He hangs out with a moon man. He swims with a school of playful fish. He frolics with odd bird-like animals in a garden of plants with flowers that look like feet. One night Sam meets and falls in love with a woman with gold shoes and a silver

crown. (She is literally a falling star.) Sadly, he can only be with her when he is asleep.

From that moment on, his life — both waking and dreaming — spins out of control. She demands he spend all his time with her. His dreamtime friends become jealous of all the time he spends with his new girlfriend and turn on him. And it gets worse, but I don't want to be a spoiler.

Quijada, who stars as the show's hapless hero, is credited in the program as the show's "creator." But this show is clearly a Chicago-style group effort, with two directors, Teatro Vista ensemble-member Sandra Marquez and Physical Theater Festival Chicago co-founder Alice da Cunha, a large crew of talented designers (costumers, set designers, puppet designers) and nimble, clever physical comedians. Together they have crafted a fast-paced, highly polished show full of eye-popping visuals — colorful costumes courtesy of Caitlin McLeod's surreal variations on contemporary fashions; the whimsical puppets of

'THE DREAM KING'

★★★★½

Where: Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division St.

When: Through June 18

Tickets: \$20-\$45

Run-time: 90 minutes, no intermission

Info: teatrovista.org

Mike Oleon operated by a team of puppeteers; and unearthly props designed by Saskia Bakker, including layers of diaphanous curtains on which are projected dream-like films. All are presented on Joe Schermoly's surreal, cave-like set.

"The Dream King" is performed like a silent movie, almost entirely without words, and as was the practice in those early cinema presentations, the show uses title cards — here in English, Spanish and Polish. (The performances are so evocative you don't really need the titles.)

As Sam, Quijada is utterly endearing and hilarious. A gifted physical comedian, he can win big

laughs with just a tiny gesture or a roll of his eyes. When he moves across the stage you can't help but think of other limber-bodied, rubber-faced comic greats: Jim Carrey, Jerry Lewis, Jaques Tati, Rowan Atkinson, and of course Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton.

This is not surprising. Quijada was a member of the ensemble of the Silent Theatre Company, which specialized in doing silent movie-like plays, (including his charming two-hander "The Duelling Gentlemen" in 2014, in which he also starred).

Every member of the talented ensemble plays a part in the success of the show. Ashlyn Lozano brings her own quirky, comic energy to the role of the shooting star-turned-dream girlfriend. She also brings a depth and freshness to a character that could easily be an idealized — or demonized — mere projection of a man's fantasies. Lozano's star girl is her own person who, by being a real woman in a dream world, actually helps the sweet, but immature Sam, grow up.

And Jean Claudio excels in

various supporting roles, including a hilarious, smug French waiter. Claudio is listed in the program as "a circus and theater performer," and that experience shows in their Chaplin-esque wit and grace.

There may be no dialogue in the show, but it is far from silent. Behind all of the action on stage is an intricate soundtrack, a pastiche of sound effects, original tunes and copious quotations from opera, movie scores and popular tunes. The program credits Quijada, Matthew Chapman, Elliot Taggart and Ethan T. Parcell with the making of this score (Chapman also gets a sound design credit), and hats off to them. (Despite being billed as a "silent musical," no one sings or lip syncs.)

Reportedly, Quijada has been working on "The Dream King" for many, many years, eventually sidelined by the pandemic shutdowns. He has said that he used his time in lockdown to refine the show. It was worth the wait. This amazing production, by turns charming and playful, bittersweet and deeply moving, could not be better. Or more satisfying.