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## Insect interplay

by Jim Gladstone  
Wednesday May 23, 2018



Entomologists Jeff (Lucas Verbrughe) and Betty (Lori Prince) discuss New York's bedbug epidemic in "An Entomologist's Love Story" at SF Playhouse.  
Photo: Jessica Palopoli

The pretty, hopeful closing scene of San Francisco Playhouse's "An Entomologist's Love Story" finds Betty (Lori Prince), a self-protectively cynical research scientist, beginning to let her romantic guard down after years of online hookups and internal solitude.

Betty's touching final soliloquy is delivered over a recorded score in which the clicks and chirrs of insects are mixed into dreamy electronic music, and accompanied by scores of tiny flickering lights representing fireflies, which extend beyond the stage, enveloping the audience in a luminous hug of optimism. (Theodore J.H. Hulsker's sound design and Kurt Landisman's lighting add a welcome ephemeral dimension to Melissa Ross' occasionally too-snappy script.)

Emotionally, visually, and sonically, the scene brought to mind the 2009 pop video "Fireflies" by Adam Young, aka Owl City. Like that love-it-or-hate-it bonbon of bleeping sweetness, the

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whole of "An Entomologist's Love Story" may be polarizing. It's a clever piece of work, openhearted but perhaps a bit too tidy. The happy ending may leave you all smiles, or it could induce a minor toothache. I ended up on the smiling side, able to keep my own cynicism in check. So did much of the opening-night crowd.

Over the course of 90 fast, funny, intermissionless minutes, longtime academic colleagues (and long-ago couple) Betty and Jeff (Lucas Verbrughe) find their cheerful, bickering, two-decade stasis unexpectedly metamorphosing. Over the years, Betty has adopted the aggressive presence of a rhinoceros beetle; Jeff, that of a conflict-averse earthworm. The arrivals of love interests Lindsay (Jessica Lynn Carroll) and Andy (Will Springhorn Jr.) set their insect world a-scuttle.

Lindsay and Jeff meet cute. Too cute, really. Fearing a home infestation of bedbugs, she improbably phones the entomology lab at the Museum of Natural History for advice. He, naturally, invites her in for a consultation/flirtation. As Lindsay makes herself a regular presence at the museum, Betty (and surely most of the audience) jumps to the conclusion that this chirpy-voiced, flapper-physiqued, cookie-baking visitor is inherently below Jeff's caliber. And certainly far beneath her own.

But the biologist's impulse toward rigid taxonomy is disrupted when Andy (Will Springhorn, Jr.) sits down beside Betty on a park bench uninvited. Hulking and highbrowed (in both senses of the word), he's a janitor who casually references "War and Peace" and is two steps ahead of every assumption Betty will soon make about him.

Convincingly at home in his character's skin, Springhorn, who looks like a handsomer Nicholas Cage, plays Andy with a touch of naturalism that goes a long way toward keeping the play from slipping from rom-com into sitcom.

The introduction of Andy with all his ambiguities also deepens Prince's portrayal of Betty. Elements of caricature slip away. Both character and actress seem to molt their confining superficialities, and in that last speech, spread their wings. Ross' script, Giovanna Sardelli's direction and the entire cast's performances all get tighter and smarter in the home stretch.

Overall the ensemble's terrific chemistry and timing are enough to compensate for what feels like a significant flaw in the script, which is only compounded by some of Sardelli's production choices:

While the firefly finale works like a charm, the overall conceit of the main characters being entomologists, and the title of the show for that matter, is awkward. The evening opens and closes with Betty directly addressing the audience, delivering lectures on insect mating behavior. There are enormous projected images of praying mantis bed-death, honeybee horniness and, d'ohh!, Madonna. She's a man-eating queen bee. Get it?

But these creepy-crawly metaphors don't reemerge within the body of drama, and the fact that Betty and Jeff happen to focus on insects in their work is largely superfluous to the plot and its themes. Sardelli further embellishes this misbegotten motif with looming projections of dragonflies (also designed by Theodore Hulsker).

In the end, despite a few bugs in the program, "An Entomologist's Love Story" makes for a fine spring evening's entertainment. Amidst the relentless nastiness of our daily news, its humane perspectives and credibly upbeat conclusion are a pleasure and a balm.

**Through June 23. Tickets from \$35. [www.sfplayhouse.org](http://www.sfplayhouse.org) (<http://www.sfplayhouse.org>)**

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