

‘Triangle’ well acted with many surprises

Ghost-busting, grad school and mixed-race romance interweave in the complex new musical “Triangle,” which TheatreWorks opened Saturday in a world premiere production at Lucie Stern Theater in Palo Alto.

The show is set in the Greenwich Village building where a fire broke out at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory more than a century ago, and 146 people died, including many who jumped or fell from a burning ninth floor.



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The musical jumps back and forth in time between 2011 and the days leading up to that fire in 1911. The show’s authors (Curtis Moore, Thomas Mizer and Joshua Scher) have fallen under the spell of British playwright Tom Stoppard’s “Arcadia,” which is also set in two different centuries, in the same room, moving back and forth in time.

A fatal fire

“Triangle” opens in the modern era, as two NYU grad students do their thesis research in that building where the fire took place a century earlier. Enter a history buff who is trying to identify a window from which two lovers jumped during that fire.

Meredith McDonough has directed the show fluidly, moving back and forth between time periods with thoughtful pacing, and many surprises. Scenic designer Daniel Zimmerman



‘TRIANGLE’ — Cynthia (Sharon Rietkerk) and Brian (Ross Lekites) share a light moment outside their lab in TheatreWorks’ “Triangle,” playing through Aug. 2 at the Lucie Stern Theater in Palo Alto. Photo by Kevin Berne.

has created a cavernous turn-of-the-century, high-ceilinged, Manhattan office building interior, which reminds us that people fill its emptiness.

The acting is a treat. Ross Lekites plays a young chemistry grad student afraid to fall in love because he has not yet grieved the death of his sister.

Impressively, Zachary Prince creates two distinct characters. Early on he is a 2011 history buff obsessed with understanding his family’s mysterious connection to the 1911 fire. Then

seamlessly he transforms into a 1911 New York melting pot Italian immigrant who falls in love with a Jewish immigrant, to mutual family horror.

Megan McGinnis is otherworldly as a young Yiddish-speaking seamstress trying to make her way in the New World.

Sharon Reitkerk moves successfully back and forth between a snarky 2011 grad student and a pregnant 1911 widow.

The songs often come in pairs. Thus

in “Nine Floors Up” grad student Lekites fears the excitement of New York City, and how it might be too much for him. But that is followed by “Can You Imagine?” in which his feelings shift dramatically as he is confronted with a love-at-first-sight romantic possibility.

In the showstoppers “Love” and “Take My Hand,” a couple from each century tiptoes cautiously toward romance, as one of the actors (Prince) plays a lover in both time periods. Now that’s a triangle.

Hanging on to the past

The musical looks at how we hang on to the past and memorialize the dead, at the expense of moving forward with our lives and learning to love in the present. In a story that spends so much time examining cause and effect, however, its search for causes falters in the play’s Twin Tower references by omitting any mention of Osama Bin Laden’s elaborately enumerated motivations for Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 attack.

“Triangle” asks us to consider whether we live in the past or in the present, and to reflect on what might be the relationship between the two. And it reminds us that if we are not able to grieve, then we are not able to love deeply.

For tickets to “Triangle” visit theatreworks.org, or call (650) 463-1960. John Angell Grant is the Daily Post’s theater critic. Email him at johnangellgrant@gmail.com.