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## ONLY THE MOON HOWLS

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WOW!

Star-crossed love gets a fresh new highly theatrical spin as Theatre Unleashed gives Dean Farrell Bruggeman's 50-minute Hollywood Fringe Festival gem, *Only The Moon Howls*, a thoroughly engaging first full staging.



The screeching brakes heard several times early on suggest that "happily ever after" may not be what the fates have in store for Jake (Michael Lutheran) and Whitney (Julia Plostnieks) despite a meet-cute at Starbucks that would do any Hollywood romcom proud.

Then again, their first encounter (and what transpires in the years that follow) may actually be an "enhanced" version of the truth, one concocted by the quartet of "guides" who serve as our escorts on a journey through Jake and Whitney's decade and a half together. (Think *Our Town*'s ubiquitous Stage Manager multiplied by four.)

There is indeed a Thornton Wilder feel to Bruggeman's one-act (the title comes from a George Carlin quote: "There are nights when the wolves are silent, and only the moon howls") as chief Guide Graydon Schlichter (assisted by Margaret Giaccum, Sammi Lappin, and Madeleine Miller) takes us from life event to life event (at one point skipping ahead a couple of years to make up for time lost in the previous scene), though unlike *Our Town*'s Stage Manager, it is the *essence* of truth that proves more important to the Guides than truth itself.



Jake's wedding proposal, for instance, turns out not to have been nearly as romantic as the one the guides have presented us with.

And always, hanging over the heads of the two made-for-each-other lovers, is a foreboding that their time together here on earth will be limited (which is another way to say, expect to observe grown men cry as you wipe away your own tears).

Eric Cire's direction is both imaginative and stylish, and all four Guides play their parts with verve.



Since 2007, Steven Stanley's StageSceneLA.com has spotlighted the best in Southern California theater via reviews, interviews, and its annual StageSceneLA Scenies.

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Still, like the delicate soufflé that it is, Bruggeman's dramedy could easily fall flat without a pair of romantic leads who have you from hello, which is one reason why the boy-next-door charming Lutheran and the radiant, vivacious Plostnieks make for such a winning couple. Add to that the fact that both actors can move from the delightfully comedic to the touchingly dramatic at a heartbeat and you've got a Jake and Whitney with whom you wouldn't mind spending twice as many minutes (or years for that matter).



Cire's set design strips away the upstage wall to reveal a slightly cluttered backstage (an appropriately theatrical touch) from which the Guides both observe and comment. Costume designer Brandie June clothes the two leads in character-appropriate, not-too-trendy garb and the Guides in basic black shirts and pants, niftily accessorized whenever they step into cameo roles. Aaron Lyons' sound design ups the emotional ante every step of the way, with subtly affecting background tunes and just-right effects. (Unfortunately, a technical glitch disabled Gregory Craft's lighting design at the performance reviewed.) Erin Scott is stage manager.

The only thing going against the latest from Theatre Unleashed is a running time so brief, you probably won't want to plan your *entire* evening around it, so prepare accordingly.

Short and sweet and sad and lovely. Only *The Moon Howls* proves a heart-touching treat.

Note: You may expect to see either Kate Dylar and Carey Matthews playing opposite Lutheran or Plostnieks—or each other—at any given performance, or the same two leads reviewed here. In addition, Supporting Guides alternate in the Head Guide role, with Eric Stachura stepping in at certain performances.



The Belfry Stage, Upstairs at the Crown, 11031 Camarillo St., North Hollywood, Through March 12. Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00. Also Monday March 7 at 8:00. Reservations: 818 849-4039 [www.theatreunleashed.org](http://www.theatreunleashed.org)

—Steven Stanley  
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Photos: Alicia Reyes

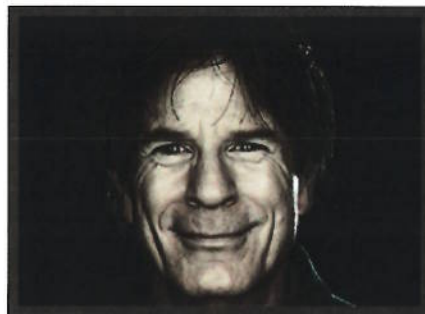
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As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. [\(read more\)](#)

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