

## Stage company's "Contact" is fresh and energetic

BY MAL VINCENT  
THE VIRGINIAN-PILOT

JUST WHEN WE HAD almost given up, here is excitement on the local theater scene. **Genuine excitement! Total originality! Something blessedly new.** Not just crowd-pleasing, toe-tapping entertainment or classic drama of the heart-wrenching formula, but a mixture of both, with the formula thrown away.

**At long last the Virginia Stage Company has come up with a show that is going to stir a great deal of talk around town – and a flood at the box office.** It has, in fact, made "Contact."

Sure, there have been many competent and well-done shows at the Wells Theatre, but many of them have looked over-rehearsed and sometimes pretentious. It has been a long time since one could get authentically "excited" there. (In fact, I can't remember when).

"Contact," which calls itself a "dance play" because no one knows exactly what to call it, is intelligent and entertaining, but its smarts are new smarts. If movies can have film noir, then theater can have dance noir, and here it is – a dark but eventually joyous journey of redemption among people who seek that elusive moment, contact, when they realize they are a part of a human race that might, after all, not have excluded them.

No one sings. Everyone dances, and through three seemingly unrelated vignettes there is a common theme of searching for love or sex, or both.

Everyone who has ever sat alone in a singles bar with no one to talk with but his drink will identify with Michael Wiley, the klutzy advertising executive who has just won an award but suddenly realizes he is 43 years old and really knows no one. He considers suicide, but he keeps messing it up. He retreats to a dark, mysterious dance hall called Minnie's that is a pool hall by day. There, he learns what a difference a girl in a yellow dress can make. She's the belle of the ball, accepting and refusing dance offers like a queen on a throne rather than just a bar stool. He wants her. She gives him a glance and, eventually, a dance.

Simple, and yet both tragic and joyful. Eventually he learns that the girl in the yellow dress might be just a dream, but a dream that is needed. The girl in the apartment below him might be more down to earth, but she, too, could be a dream.

Contact is the necessary ingredient, and, as suggested here, it is available to all who don't fight it. In its own way, "Contact" is as much a tragic modern classic as "Brokeback Mountain" in its treatment of people who are suppressed and cannot express themselves.

Fletcher McTaggart brings a boyish, perhaps a bit calculated, presence to Wiley, but he eventually persuades us to root for him in his feeble, seemingly hopeless pursuit of the girl in the yellow dress. It is something of a foolproof role when it comes to gaining our sympathy. The creators say Ambrose Bierce's short story "An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge" was an inspiration. It is about a spy who is about to be hanged but is saved – though only in a dream.

Sheri Griffith has the ultrachallenging assignment of playing the woman whom every man will want. She brings both poise and abandonment to it in a complex suggestion that

makes the girl in the yellow dress both aloof and available. Griffith is tall, 5 foot 9, with most of it legs. She's a Cyd Charisse for a new dancing age, complete with high extension and regal bearing.

Griffith is quite different than Deborah Yates was in the role on Broadway, suggesting an expanded possibility in dance to interpret character. One can't imagine that she will step back into the line by Christmas as one of Radio City's Rockettes, but such are the ways of show business.

Susan Stroman's original choreography, re-created here by director Tome Cousin, who was in the original Broadway cast, gives an erotic edge to swing dancing.

The evening's opener is called "Swinging" and is inspired by Fragonard's painting "The Swing," which adorns the curtain when ticket buyers arrive. It is the most outrageously erotic of the three vignettes. A coquettish girl on a swing (Ariel Shepley) performs a mating ritual of rivalry between an aristocrat who offers her diamonds and booze and a servant whom she obviously prefers. Sean Ewing's gymnastic exploits make him the more ardent of the pursuers. There is a surprise ending.

"Did You Move?" is the other vignette – and the more comedic – exploring the balletic and sexual daydreams of a suppressed housewife who imagines she is a great ballerina making lovedance with the headwaiter at an Italian restaurant whenever her husband isn't looking. Her foulmouthed, bossy and domineering husband (who could come right out of the Sopranos brood) orders her about as though she were less than human. He orders her not to move, or speak, while he invades the buffet.

Tina Moya, as the gawky wife, dreams and dances grands jetes to spite him. She's a clown with dance technique, done to music by Grieg, Tchaikovsky and Bizet. This type of clowning was once the staple of television's Imogene Coca with her "Sleeping Beauty" and other ballet spoofs. Thom Graham is her ardent headwaiter (and also supports Miss Yellow Dress for most of the lifts). Dramatist John Weidman keeps us alert with the possibility that not all dreams are fulfilled.

The music is recorded and ranges from Bizet to the Beach Boys.

The Wells Theatre setting returns "Contact" to the intimacy it conveyed in its beginnings in New York's smallish Mitzi E. Newhouse Theater before it moved to the larger Vivian Beaumont Theater at Lincoln Center. Unlike the Broadway outing, it is performed here in a proscenium theater rather than in the round. The choreography adjusts well.

Chris Hanna, the company's artistic director, made a brilliant choice in meeting subscribers' demands for a musical with this vehicle, eliminating the need for live music.

The problem seemed in finding dancers. There is no great dancing here because, in fact, the show is theatrical rather than balletic. There are, though, some very fine acting dancers who are theatrical with a capital T.

**"Contact" is the most original new musical since "A Chorus Line" and is a remarkable gem in VSC's crown. Besides all that, it's very sexy.**

## T H E A T E R R E V I E W

"Contact"

What The dance play, originally directed by Susan Stroman, recreated by Tom Cousin  
When Today at 4 and 8 p.m., Sunday at 2 and 7 p.m., Tuesday at 7 p.m., Wednesdays  
through Saturdays at 8 p.m.; continuing through April 23

Where The Wells Theatre, Monticello Avenue and Tazewell Street, Norfolk  
Tickets \$27 to \$42  
Call (757) 627-1234

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**ANNE M. PETERSON** The Virginia Stage Company's "Contact" is a journey of redemption among people seeking to belong.