TRELAWNY OF THE WELLS

PRESENTED BY: The Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey, 36 Madison Ave., Madison

WHEN: Through Dec. 30

INFO: Call 973-408-5600 or visit shakespearenj.org

You’ve probably never heard of “Trelawny of the Wells” by Sir Arthur Wing Pinero, never mind seen it presented on stage. In the notes for the current production at the Shakespeare Theatre of New Jersey in Madison, Bonnie J. Monte admits that back in 1982, she’d never heard of the play either. But then her old mentor, the famed director Nikos Psacharopoulos of the Williamstown Theatre Festival, decided to do it and Monte, who served as his assistant, fell in love with the work. She always hoped to direct it herself.

Now here we are, 30 years later, and for the last offering of the theater’s 50th anniversary season, Monte has finally realized her dream. This is fortunate for us, her audience, because “Trelawny” is a lovely play, brimming with finely observed humanity, warmth, and gentle humor.

Still, productions of this “love letter” to actors and acting (as Monte has dubbed it) are few and far between. “Trelawny of the Wells” first appeared in London at the turn of the century, ran for a bit in New York and has enjoyed only three revivals since. The last was in the 1975, with a stellar cast that included Meryl Streep, John Lithgow, Mandy Patinkin and Mary Beth Hurt in the starring role. Nevertheless, it ran for only a little over a month. There’s been only two film versions, both silent.

Despite its obvious charms, it’s not difficult to figure out why “Trelawny” is rarely produced. For one thing, it requires a director with both a firm hand and a light touch. For another, it needs a sophisticated, knowledgeable audience who might understand something about theater in the late Victorian era. Actors were not always the cherished and sought-after celebrities they are today. Even after the turn of the century, those who came to Hollywood and looked for an apartment to rent often encountered signs that warned “No dogs or actors.”

Miss Rose Trelawny, portrayed by a luminous Nisi Sturgis, is a member of the Barridge Wells Theatre company. The play opens on a dinner being held at a boarding house in Rose’s honor. It seems she’s decided to retire from acting in order to marry the very wealthy and well-connected Arthur Gower (Jordon Coughtry, whose appearance and manner is reminiscent of Hugh Grant).

What follows is a kind of modern Romeo and Juliet-type romance with the two lovers caught between worlds and two very different kinds of families. Rose’s theater family is an eccentric and boisterous lot, consisting of the aging Telfers (John Fitzgibbons and Elizabeth Shepherd); the highly emotional Ferdinand Gadd (Jon Barker) and his bubbly partner, Avonia Bunn (Rachel Fox); the experienced diva, Imogen Parrot (Caralyn Kozlowski); the anything-for-a laugh Augustus Colpoys (Connor Carew), and, last but not least, utility player-turned-budding playwright, Tom Wrench (John Patrick Hayden).

Rose takes leave of this lively crew to live with the Gowers, as fabulously rich as they are fabulously stolid and boring. Arthur’s grandfather, Sir William Gower (Edmond Genest) is agonizingly proper while his sheltered great aunt, Trafalgar (Jennifer Harmon) constantly (and hilariously) worries about actions that are “out of place.” The two younger members, Captain De Foenix and his wife (Matt Sullivan and Erica Knight) survive in the stifling atmosphere by simply agreeing to everything.

Everyone in the cast gets their moment to shine, but the show really belongs to company veteran Genest, who brings both nuance and dimensionality to what could have been a stock character, and Monte, of course, who not only directs, but had a hand in the sound and —with Anita Tripath Easterling — the scenic design. Hugh Hanson is
If you’ve had your fill of nutcrackers and Tiny Tims this Christmas season, hie thee hence to the Shakespeare Theatre where “Trelawny of the Wells” will lift your spirits in a quite different but altogether agreeable way.

responsible for the sumptuous costumes.