

Dancing In The Garden

by Michael Walker

The Living Theatre, 21 Clinton Street

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[Melanie N. Lee](#) · August 12, 2011

Maria Tanglia of Worcester, Massachusetts loves her God, her Church, and her Italian American family, who raise her under strict Roman Catholic guidance. Maria tells the audience, "Mama spoke three languages besides Italian: English, Latin, and Catholic." Her father, Angelo, more lenient and philosophical than her traditionalist mother Rosa, points out various posted signs to his daughter. When they spot a restaurant sign saying "No Dancing in the Garden," Angelo leads Maria into a brief defiant waltz among the growing plants. The priest, Father Mike, visits the Tanglia family frequently, offering avuncular spiritual advice. He also lovingly grills Maria in the confessional. However, at age 15, Maria discovers another kind of love when she kisses a girl in the music room of St. Patrick's High School—and she likes it. Can Maria follow God and lesbianism at the same time?

Dancing in the Garden, written by Michael Walker and directed by Bruce Ward, explores themes of faith, tradition, attachment, rules, beliefs, conflicting drives, guilt, shame—and what it means to be in a "state of grace." Afraid of the parishioners' gossip and of Father Mike's disapproval, and keenly aware of Catholic law, Maria stops taking communion, then stops going to confession, and finally stops attending Mass. Although she has disengaged from things she's loved, she staunchly insists that St. Mary's is still her church. "I don't want to go to the gay church across the tracks!" she declares to her lover Dani, whom she met at the college library. "I want to go to my church!"

Over the years, family crises intervene: arguments, estrangements, sickness, care giving, death. Soon Maria finds herself estranged from school and from creative pursuits, as she feels the differing forces in her life forcing her to choose among them. Maria bemoans, "What if you believe in God with all your heart and soul, and you can't stop sinning..."

This realistic, provocative play employs good details, imagination, and humor. Little Maria carries her Grandmother Ricci's rosary, blessed by the Pope. Teenaged Maria imagines Father Mike saying to her, "No communion, Maria? Is it because you're f***ing Kathy Fess?" When young adult Maria tells Dani she wants to be married in the church, Dani scoffs, "A Catholic church?"

Sarah Corey is effective as Maria. Judith Knight Young does a superb job as Maria's mother Rosa, whose beliefs in Church law have been ingrained in her since her childhood in Italy. Joe Gioco as Angelo has a sweet quality. Sam Kitchin and Cathy Prince perform well as Father Mike and Dani, respectively.

One significant theme is how our relations to the rules change as we grow. We learn them as a child, are shamed by them as adolescents, and embrace, reject, or otherwise cope with them as adults. *Dancing in the Garden*, among other things, explores how we deal with the concept of sin, and with the realization that we are not the only sinners in the world, nor the worst.

Author: Michael Walker; **Director:** Bruce Ward; **Producer:** The Festival Theatre Company in Association with Paul Gregory and Gary Verrill