College of DuPage Theater Department

Presents

Picasso at the Lapin Agile

By Steve Martin



Directed by Daniel Millhouse

The College Theater Department sincerely thanks the library for research support for classes studying the script and production, as well as for the cast, director, and production team working on the project.

This Play Contains Mature Themes and Language

Table of Contents

Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis 3

Setting 3

Characters 3

Picasso at the Lapin Agile Director's Note 4

About the Author: Steve Martin

Articles for your Consideration

The Night Before Everything: Paris, 1904 6

Anachronism as Delight: The Comedy of the Absurd 7

Talent, Genius, and Delusion: Who Gets to Decide? 8

Two Paths to the Same Truth: Art and Science 9

Who Gets to Matter? The People Who Orbit Genius 10

Genius in the Age of Algorithm: Why This Play Matters 11

Other Reviews

Picasso at the Lapin Agile 12

Play Review: "Picasso at the Lapin Agile" 14

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance 16

Things to Watch For in Performance 16

Things to Think About After the Performance 16

Other Analysis Tools 16

Additional Information

Play/Production Information

Brief Synopsis
A clever, fast-paced comedy brings together two icons, Pablo Picasso and Albert Einstein before either achieved fame. Set in 1904 at the Lapin Agile, a cafe in Paris, the future icons debate art, science, and genius while surrounded by a colorful cast of locals and eccentrics. Even geniuses need a night out in this thought-provoking comedy.

Setting
A bar in Paris

Time
1904

Author's Notes
One year later, Albert Einstein published the *Special Theory of Relativity*. Three years later, Pablo Picasso painted "Les Demoiselles D'Avignon."

Characters
Freddy - The owner and bartender of the Lapin Agile
Gaston - An older man
Germaine - Waitress and Freddy's girlfriend
Albert Einstein - Twenty-five
Suzanne - Nineteen
Sagot - Picasso's art dealer
Pablo Picasso - Twenty-three
Charles Dabernow Schmendiman - A man in his thirties
The Countess
A female Admirer
A visitor

Note: Contains adult themes and language

Picasso at the Lapin Agile Director's Note

Fall 2026

Welcome to the Lapin Agile, where the drinks are cheap, the conversation is enlightening, and the twentieth century is about to walk through the door!

It is 1904 in Montmartre. In one small bohemian bar, a young Albert Einstein is a year away from rewriting our understanding of time and space, and a young Pablo Picasso is on the verge of reinventing how we see the world. Steve Martin's *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* imagines what might happen if these two brilliant, brash, and slightly ridiculous young men met on the same night, at the same bar, each certain the future belongs to him.

At its heart, this play asks big questions with a wink. What separates genius from delusion? Are art and science really opposites, or two languages describing the same truth? And who gets to matter? The geniuses whose names we remember, or the people who poured their drinks, loved them, and believed in them before they were anybody? Today, as AI reshapes what we mean by creativity and authorship, and as everyone online feels like the main character of history in the making, Martin's comedy feels surprisingly current.

In this production, we treat the Lapin Agile as a world still being sketched, an unfinished canvas where pencil lines, wet paint, and the occasional anachronism meet. Time bends here. Rules get broken. And the magic of art is not something saved for museums. It belongs to whoever is brave enough to make it.

That is our hope for you tonight. A painting, an equation, a song, a joke, each one is real magic, and it is being made right here, in this room, by all of us together. Because, as the play reminds us, "The twentieth century has to start somewhere, and why not now?"

So pull up a stool, raise a glass, and get ready to cheers to the upcoming century. Something is about to change.



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Fall 2026 Production of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Lucien Feldman as Albert Einstein and Eli Rodriguez as Pablo Picasso

About the Author: Steve Martin



Steve Martin (born 1945) is one of the most versatile entertainers of his generation: a stand-up comedian, actor, screenwriter, novelist, playwright, Grammy-winning banjo player, and serious art collector. *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, his first full-length play, brings nearly all of those passions together in one bar.

Martin was born in Waco, Texas, and grew up in Southern California. As a teenager, he worked at Disneyland, where he sold guidebooks, learned magic tricks in the park's magic shop, and taught himself to play the banjo. He went on to study philosophy and theater in college, a combination that shows up all over *Picasso*, a comedy built around big questions about time, space, art, and meaning.

Martin got his professional start as a television writer, winning an Emmy for his work on *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*. By the late 1970s, he had become the most popular stand-up comedian in America, selling out arenas with an absurdist act that featured an arrow through the head, balloon animals, and his trademark catchphrase, "Well, excuuuuse me!" He became one of the most frequent hosts of *Saturday Night Live* and won Grammy Awards for his comedy albums.

On film, Martin starred in comedies such as *The Jerk*, *Roxanne* (which he also wrote), *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, *Father of the Bride*, and *Bowfinger*. More recently, he co-created and stars in the television series *Only Murders in the Building*. As a writer, he has published novels and novellas, including *Shopgirl* and *An Object of Beauty* (a satire of the New York art world), as well as the acclaimed memoir *Born Standing Up*. With Edie Brickell, he wrote the Broadway musical *Bright Star*, and his other plays include *The Underpants* and *Meteor Shower*.

Martin's honors include the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, the Kennedy Center Honors, and an Honorary Academy Award. His bluegrass albums have also earned him a Grammy, proof that he is as serious about the banjo as he is about comedy.

Picasso at the Lapin Agile has strong Chicago roots. After early readings and workshops, the play had its world premiere at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company in October 1993, directed by Randall Arney. It went on to Los Angeles and then to an Off-Broadway run in New York, and it has since become a favorite of regional, community, and college theaters across the country. In 2017, Martin revised the script; that updated version is the one now licensed for performance, and the one you will see in this production.

Martin has always been drawn to the place where intelligence and silliness meet. In *Picasso*, he puts two of history's greatest minds in a room and lets them be brilliant, petty, flirtatious, and ridiculous all at once, which may be the most human portrait of genius there is.

Articles for your Consideration

The Night Before Everything: Paris, 1904

Steve Martin sets his play on a very specific night: October 8, 1904. The date is invented, but the moment is real. Paris at the turn of the twentieth century was the creative capital of the world, and Montmartre, the hilltop neighborhood in the city's north, was its bohemian heart. Montmartre was cheap, a little rough, and full of artists. Painters, poets, musicians, and dreamers crowded into its studios and cafés. Just outside the door of the Lapin Agile, Paris was about to explode into modernism.

The Lapin Agile. The real Lapin Agile is a small cabaret on the rue des Saules that is still open today. Its history is as colorful as Martin's play. In the nineteenth century, it went by names like *Au Rendez-vous des Voleurs* ("The Thieves' Meeting Place") and the *Cabaret des Assassins*. Around 1875, the caricaturist André Gill painted a new sign showing a rabbit leaping out of a cooking pot. Locals began calling the place *Le Lapin à Gill* ("Gill's Rabbit"), which, said quickly, became *Lapin Agile*, "the nimble rabbit."

In the early 1900s, the cabaret was run by Frédéric "Frédé" Gérard, a guitar-playing host who kept a pet donkey named Lolo and welcomed penniless artists. Regulars included Picasso, the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, Amedeo Modigliani, and Maurice Utrillo. In 1905, Picasso paid for his food and drinks with a painting called *Au Lapin Agile*. It shows Picasso himself dressed as a harlequin, a woman named Germaine beside him, and Frédé playing the guitar in the background. In 1989, that painting sold at auction for more than $40 million. It now hangs in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Picasso in 1904. Pablo Picasso was born in Málaga, Spain, in 1881. In 1904 he settled permanently in Paris, moving into a ramshackle studio building in Montmartre nicknamed the *Bateau-Lavoir* ("the laundry boat"). He was twenty-three, broke, and ambitious. He was leaving behind his melancholy Blue Period and moving into his warmer Rose Period, full of acrobats and harlequins. In 1907, he would paint *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and with Georges Braque he would soon invent Cubism, changing the course of Western art.

Einstein in 1904. Albert Einstein, born in Ulm, Germany, in 1879, was twenty-five and working as a clerk in the Swiss patent office in Bern. In his spare time, he was thinking about light, time, and space. In 1905, his "miracle year," he published a series of papers that included the special theory of relativity and the famous equation $E = mc^2$. He would receive the Nobel Prize in Physics in 1921.

The real people around the table. Several of Martin's characters are drawn from real life. Germaine Pichot was part of Picasso's circle of friends in Paris and appears beside him in *Au Lapin Agile*; Martin reimagines her as the bar's waitress. Clovis Sagot was a real Paris art dealer, a former circus clown who bought some of Picasso's early work and was known for driving a hard bargain. Freddy is inspired by Frédé, the real proprietor. Others, like the gloriously self-confident Schmendiman, are pure Steve Martin. Martin brings these figures together on the night before everything. Picasso has not yet painted the canvas that will make him famous. Einstein has not yet published the paper that will make him a household name. The play lets us sit with them in the moment just before history happens, when everything is still possible.

Anachronism as Delight: The Comedy of the Absurd

If you are expecting a straightforward historical drama, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* will surprise you. Steve Martin's play is an absurdist comedy, and it delights in breaking its own rules.

Characters step outside the story to talk directly to the audience. They refer to the program to figure out who is supposed to enter next. Time and place behave a little strangely. And late in the evening, a mysterious Visitor arrives from the future, someone whose own kind of genius will define a different corner of the twentieth century.

This style has a long tradition. Absurdist theater, from Samuel Beckett to Tom Stoppard, plays with logic and expectation to reveal deeper truths. Martin also draws on his own background in stand-up comedy, magic, and sketch writing. The play moves quickly, mixing sophisticated wordplay with silly sight gags, and highbrow ideas about relativity with running jokes about the restroom.

Much of the fun comes from what the audience knows that the characters do not. We know that Picasso will become the most famous painter of the century and that Einstein's name will become shorthand for genius. So when they boast, doubt themselves, or make predictions about the future, we laugh with the special pleasure of hindsight. Theater people call this dramatic irony, and Martin uses it like a running gag. The characters keep guessing at what the twentieth century will bring, and the audience, sitting more than a hundred years later, already knows the answers. Or at least, we think we do.

In this production, we lean into that playfulness. Our Lapin Agile is imagined as an unfinished painting, a world still being sketched, with visible lines and textures that suggest something not quite complete. Like Picasso's canvases, the space invites you to see it from more than one angle. You may also hear the occasional anachronistic sound or song. These choices are not mistakes. They are meant to remind us that this night is timeless and ephemeral all at once.

The design team carries this idea into every element. Lighting can shift from the warm glow of a smoky cabaret into something stranger and more theatrical, especially when the Visitor arrives, an entrance we want to feel impossible before he even says a word. Sound mixes period cabaret music with songs from decades that have not happened yet. Costumes ground the characters firmly in 1904, so that when the rules do bend, the surprise lands. For the actors, the key is to play it all completely straight. Absurd comedy works best when the characters take their own stakes seriously, no matter how ridiculous the situation becomes.

The guiding principle is to treat anachronism as delight, not distraction: to break the world's rules without breaking the audience's trust. Underneath the absurdity, the stakes are real. Characters want love, recognition, and meaning. The bar becomes a pressure cooker where egos collide and ideas spark.

Martin even builds a wink about this into the play. Near the end, one character marvels at how the evening fit exactly between the moment the lights came up and the moment the lights went down. It is a joke about theater, of course. But it is also a reminder that every performance, like every moment in history, happens only once, in one room, with the people who are there.

Talent, Genius, and Delusion: Who Gets to Decide?

"You see, there's a distinction between talent and genius," Schmendiman explains. "Talent is the ability to say things well, but genius is the ability to, well, say things!"

Then he keeps going: "Talent sells a million in a year, but genius sells five thousand a year for two hundred years!" Schmendiman means it as a boast about himself, but he has accidentally stumbled onto something true. Talent is rewarded right away. Genius is often recognized only in hindsight, sometimes long after the person who made it is gone.

It is a joke, but it is also the central question of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. What is genius? Where does it come from? And how can you tell the difference between a visionary and someone who is simply very, very sure of himself?

Everyone in the Lapin Agile is convinced that they are about to matter. Picasso knows he is a great painter. Einstein knows his ideas will change the world. Schmendiman knows his invention, a building material made of asbestos, kerosene, and radium, will make him rich and famous. The comedy comes from the fact that two of these men are right, and one of them is spectacularly, hilariously wrong. And in the moment, it is not always easy to tell which is which.

That is the joke and the ache at the heart of the play. Confidence and delusion can look exactly alike from the inside. Most of the ambitious young people who sat in Montmartre's cafés in 1904 were never remembered. History only tells us which bets paid off. And history is full of reversals. Vincent van Gogh famously sold almost nothing during his lifetime; today his paintings are among the most valuable objects on Earth. Einstein himself, after finishing his university degree, could not land an academic job and ended up reviewing patent applications in Bern. In the fall of 1904, the two men at the center of Martin's play looked, to most of the world, like a struggling painter who could barely pay his rent and a clerk with an unusual hobby. If you had walked into the Lapin Agile that night, would you have recognized them?

The play turns this uncertainty into comedy by letting the characters argue about their own greatness in real time. Picasso and Einstein measure themselves against each other, trading boasts and challenges like rival athletes. Each needs the other to acknowledge his brilliance, and neither quite wants to admit that he might have met his match. It is ego at its most human: brilliant people can be insecure, competitive, and a little ridiculous, too.

Martin also asks whether genius is something you are born with or something you chase. Picasso describes his work as something he must be ready to receive: "when the time comes for it to be done, God, I want to be ready for it." Einstein talks about ideas as if they arrive fully formed. Yet both men are also working obsessively. The play suggests that inspiration may be a gift, but showing up for it is a choice.

Finally, the play asks who gets to decide. Is genius timeless, or is it simply well preserved by the culture that outlives it? Art dealers, critics, museums, and history books all play a role in deciding whose work survives. Sagot, the dealer, is a reminder that art is also a business, and that someone is always calculating what a genius might be worth.

That question feels especially pointed today. Social media can make someone famous overnight, and algorithms decide which songs, videos, and artists we see first. Popularity is easier to measure than ever, but it is still not the same thing as lasting value. Schmendiman would thrive in a world of followers and viral moments. Whether anyone would remember him in two hundred years is another matter.

Two Paths to the Same Truth: Art and Science

On the surface, Picasso and Einstein could not be more different. One is a painter, all instinct, appetite, and charisma. The other is a physicist, all logic, numbers, and thought experiments. The play sets them up as rivals. But by the end of the evening, they discover that they are having the same conversation in different languages.

Both men, in 1904, were about to break the world's old rules of perception. For centuries, Western painting had tried to show the world from a single, fixed point of view. Picasso's Cubism would shatter that, showing objects from many angles at once. For centuries, physics had treated time and space as fixed and absolute. Einstein's relativity would reveal that time and space bend depending on where you stand and how fast you are moving.

In other words, both men were about to tell us that how we see the world depends on where we are looking from.

Martin has great fun with this parallel. Einstein and Picasso challenge each other to a drawing duel. They argue about whether a formula can be beautiful, and whether a painting can be true. Einstein insists that his ideas are as creative as any canvas; Picasso realizes that his paintings are a kind of investigation into the nature of reality.

Historians have been fascinated by this connection, too. Years after Martin's play premiered, the historian of science Arthur I. Miller wrote a book called *Einstein, Picasso: Space, Time, and the Beauty That Causes Havoc*, exploring how the two men, working in different fields, arrived at similarly revolutionary ideas in the same few years.

The play's argument is simple and moving: art and science are not opposites. They both hunger for meaning, just dressed differently. A painting, an equation, a song, and a joke are all attempts to capture something true about the world and hand it to someone else. Picasso puts it beautifully when he describes looking at the work of the Spanish master Goya: it is as if Goya is "reaching his hand through the centuries" to tap him on the shoulder, and when Picasso paints, he hopes he is reaching forward to touch someone, too. Einstein would understand. That is what ideas do. They outlive the people, and the moments, that made them.



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Fall 2026 Production of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Eli Rodriguez as Pablo Picasso and Lucien Feldman as Albert Einstein

Who Gets to Matter? The People Who Orbit Genius

The title of the play is *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*, but Picasso is not the only person in the room. Freddy runs the bar. Germaine keeps it running. Gaston has been coming in for years. Suzanne has come looking for Picasso after a single unforgettable night. These characters are not famous, and they never will be. But Martin gives them some of the play's sharpest and most honest moments.

Throughout history, many great artists and thinkers have been surrounded by people who supported, inspired, fed, housed, and loved them, often without credit. Partners, friends, models, and muses frequently paid a price for being close to genius. The play invites us to ask: what does it cost the people who orbit greatness?

The real men behind the play were no exception. In 1904, the same year Martin's play is set, Picasso met Fernande Olivier, a young woman living in the Bateau-Lavoir. She became his partner and model for several years, appearing in many of the paintings from his Rose Period and early Cubist work. Decades later, she wrote her own memoir of their life together, finally telling the story from her side. Einstein, meanwhile, had married Mileva Marić, a fellow physics student from his university days in Zurich. Historians still debate how much she contributed to his early thinking, but her story is a reminder that the people closest to genius are often the ones history remembers least.

Suzanne is a perfect example. She arrives at the bar hoping Picasso will remember her. He does not, at least not at first. Yet she speaks with surprising clarity about her own desire and her own choices. The play lets her be funny and vulnerable without turning her into a punchline, and it quietly asks why she is cast as the muse while he is cast as the master.

Germaine is perhaps the wisest person in the bar. She has watched a parade of brilliant, boastful young men come through the door, and she sees right through them. In one of the play's most striking moments, she imagines what the coming century will bring, both its wonders and its horrors. Her vision reminds us that the twentieth century these men are so eager to start will not only be a story of genius.

Freddy, meanwhile, is a working man who runs a small business, keeps the drinks flowing, and occasionally reveals that he, too, has a philosophy of life. Gaston, the older regular, is mostly worried about his bladder, but he also brings perspective: he has seen young men certain of their own importance before.

Notice, too, how the play is built. Martin could have written a two-person debate between Picasso and Einstein. Instead, he filled the bar with a whole ensemble, and he gives nearly every character a moment to shine, a joke that lands, or an insight the famous men miss. The structure of the play itself makes an argument: great ideas rarely happen in isolation. They happen in rooms full of people, over drinks and conversation, with friends, rivals, lovers, and strangers all adding something to the mix. Theater works the same way. No performance belongs to a single star; it belongs to everyone who makes it, onstage and off.

In a world that loves the cult of the visionary, whether an artist, an inventor, or a tech founder, it is worth asking whose ambitions get centered and who gets excused in the name of greatness. The play's answer is generous. Everyone in the Lapin Agile is part of the night. Everyone contributes to the magic. And perhaps the most important question the play asks is this: what do we owe the people who loved us before we were anybody?

Genius in the Age of Algorithm: Why This Play Matters

Steve Martin wrote *Picasso at the Lapin Agile* in the early 1990s about a night in 1904. So why does it feel so current in 2026?

Start with creativity itself. Artificial intelligence can now generate images, music, and writing in seconds. Debates rage about who owns a style, who deserves credit for an idea, and whether a machine can be creative at all. The play's question, "what separates genius from imitation?", has never felt more urgent. Picasso and Einstein argue about what makes an idea original. Today, we are having the same argument with new tools on the table.

There is also the question of who owns an idea. Today, artists, inventors, and companies fight constantly over copyrights, patents, and credit. It is worth remembering that in 1904, Einstein's actual job was evaluating patent applications, deciding whether other people's inventions were truly original. In the play, Picasso and Einstein each insist that his own way of seeing the world is the truly original one, and each wants credit for it. Their sparring is funny, but it echoes the arguments filling courtrooms and comment sections today.

Consider, too, our culture's fascination with the visionary founder or the genius artist, and our habit of excusing bad behavior in the name of greatness. Picasso, in the play, is charming, brilliant, and often careless with the people around him. Audiences today are more willing to ask hard questions about how we celebrate genius, and who pays for it.

Then there is our relationship with history. On social media, everyone is the main character of their own story, and many of us feel that history is happening in real time all around us. We curate our own golden ages and ache to witness important moments firsthand. The characters in the Lapin Agile feel exactly the same way. They are certain that they are standing at the threshold of something enormous. Sometimes we are right. Sometimes we are wrong. That is the joke, and the ache, of it.

The play also speaks to anyone who has been told to choose between the arts and the sciences. Students today often feel pressure to pick a lane: the practical path or the creative one, STEM or the humanities. Martin's play refuses that choice. His painter and his physicist turn out to be kindred spirits, both chasing beauty, both breaking rules, both trying to see the world in a new way. For a college audience, that may be one of the play's most hopeful messages: curiosity does not belong to any single discipline.

Finally, the play reminds us that the line between confidence and delusion is thin, funny, and very human. It invites us to laugh at ourselves for believing that our moment is the one that matters, while also suggesting that maybe, just maybe, it is.

As Suzanne puts it, "The twentieth century has to start somewhere, and why not now?" Swap in the twenty-first century, and the line still lands. We are always standing on the edge of something changing.

Other Reviews

Picasso at the Lapin Agile

BY JONATHAN TAYLOR

Source: Taylor, Jonathan. “Picasso at the Lapin Agile.” Variety, Variety, 31 Oct. 1994, variety.com/1994/legit/reviews/picasso-at-the-lapin-agile-2-1200438749/.

With the 20th century staggering to a close, marked by unbelievable achievements and unimaginable horrors, Steve Martin has created arguably the first play to wrap up the century. Bringing together three of its most influential figures, and written in a style that borrows from one of this era’s key innovations - the sitcom - “Picasso at the Lapin Agile” is both intellectually stimulating and laugh-aloud funny. If it ultimately doesn’t live up to its heady ambitions, it’s still an entertaining evening.

Although “Picasso” is Martin’s first play, it’s a logical career detour for the actor/comedian/writer. For all the initial notoriety given his arrow-through-the-head silliness, he long ago proved to be a literate scriptwriter (adapting “Cyrano de Bergerac” and “Silas Marner” for the screen), a serious art collector and a deep thinker.

He brings all of those qualities to this play. Set in a Paris bar in 1904 (the Lapin Agile was the subject of an early Picasso painting), the work centers on an imagined first meeting the painter (Tim Hopper) had with Albert Einstein (Rick Snyder). The timing of the play is critical, presenting these two men at the moment just prior to achieving their breakthrough work - Einstein’s Special Theory of Relativity, the foundation of modern physics; and Picasso’s “Demoiselles d’Avignon,” a touchstone of cubism and modern art.

Bursting with self-confidence and youthful lustiness, and inspired by the possibilities of the new century, these respective champions of the mind and the heart debate and challenge each other, ultimately discovering they have more in common than either thought.

Martin stages a funny confrontation between the two men soon after they meet, each sure he holds the key to the new century’s greatest idea. As they circle a table in the bar, pencils at the ready, they shout “draw!” in unison, both scribbling something on a piece of paper.

“Yours is just a formula,” Picasso says dismissively when looking at what Einstein has produced.

“So’s yours,” the scientist answers, a gleeful twinkle in his eyes.

All this heady yet high-spirited banter about the meaning of genius, the sources of creative inspiration, the challenges of modernism is witnessed by the bar’s proprietors and patrons.

Looking something like the 1904 equivalent of the cast of “Cheers,” the bartender and his wife (Tracy Letts, Rondi Reed), the sly old-timer with a weak bladder (Nathan Davis) and the Picasso groupie (Paula Korologos, who also plays Einstein’s date and a third female admirer) are a Parisian chorus commenting on the two great men’s boasts and accomplishments.

Martin notes the everyday genius in each person by reserving for these otherwise unexceptional characters a surprising monologue of truly inspired insight. For example, Reed's randy bar proprietress presents a bitingly accurate prediction of what the century holds in store - cruelty will be perfected, there would be a brief lawn flamingo fad and so on. Then she dismisses it with a gesture reminiscent of Martin's character, Theodoric of York, Medieval Barber, on "Saturday Night Live."

Meanwhile, the play's two centerpieces conclude they alone can't be the 20th century's only shining stars. In a bit of "Laugh-In"-style lunacy, a pretender named Charles Davernow Schmendiman (Troy Eric West) makes a noisy bid. Like many loud self-promoters, he does indeed make his mark, albeit an unanticipated and decidedly minor one.

But Martin has a bigger notion. From 50 years in the future, he brings a certain singer - to reveal his name would ruin one of the play's pleasant surprises. Bringing some later-era cynicism to the two young genius' enthusiasm, he proves that when their names are literally written in the stars - when the people of the United States, anyway, choose their most influential figure - his will be three times as big.

This points to Martin's ultimate, yet unclear, point. A refined intellectual still pegged with a "wild and crazy guy" reputation, he's exploring the struggle between being a genius or just famous, between epochal ideas and mere notions, between the optimism of the new and the skepticism of the familiar.

It's an ambitious agenda, one that Martin never quite sorts out, even if the actors turn in spirited, convincing performances.

Instead, the play settles for being merely smart and funny, not unlike the playwright. It also serves as a long-overdue L.A. debut for Chicago's acclaimed Steppenwolf Theater. Artistic director Randall Arney keeps the complicated themes and the breakneck speed at which this comedy is delivered from becoming too overwhelming.



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage's College Theater's Fall 2026 Production of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Eli Rodriguez as Pablo Picasso and Lucien Feldman as Albert Einstein

Play Review: “Picasso at the Lapin Agile”

BY SAGE SCHUBERT

Source: Schubert, Sage. “Play Review: ‘Picasso at the Lapin Agile.’” The UCSD Guardian, The UCSD Guardian, 19 Feb. 2017, ucsdguardian.org/2017/02/19/play-review-picasso-at-the-lapin-agile/.

Steve Martin’s first full-length play, originally performed in 1993, is undergoing a revival at The Old Globe. The show, while undeniably entertaining and graced with an incredible set and cast, never quite finds its footing; bits of potential deeper meaning are lost underneath carefully crafted banter and increasingly surreal events. “Picasso at the Lapin Agile” sets out to explore the nature of genius and how the world responds to young men who will become giants, but this exploration becomes muddled by its conclusion.

At the Lapin Agile, a Parisian bar historically frequented by the titular Pablo Picasso, a lively set of characters comes to drink, socialize or wait for Picasso himself to arrive. As customers trickle in for a night of drinking, even the side characters get a bit of spotlight: The eternally cheerful barkeep Freddy (Donald Faison), regular customer and “newly old” Gaston (Hal Linden) and Picasso admirer Suzanne (Liza Lapira) play off of each other wittily enough to make us forget that Picasso himself is absent. But while the Parisians recognize the standard characters of a Paris bar scene, 25-year-old Swiss patent officer Albert Einstein (Justin Long) is a total mystery - in a good way. It takes some time to reconcile the popular conception of an elderly, widely recognized Einstein with a young man who is earnest, yes, but also seems to miss social conventions left and right. Fortunately, the banter between Einstein and the other bar patrons, especially the forward-thinking Germaine (Luna Vélez), eventually does ground him in the setting, even if it never quite feels like he belongs. Martin’s Einstein is a fun and interesting enough character to justify his presence, but through an enthusiastic lack of social awareness, Long’s portrayal feels more like a parody of who Einstein could have been rather than a genuine homage.

It takes Picasso half of the play to finally show up and for the audience to finally see who the fuss is all about. Philippe Bowgen manages to portray a womanizing, charismatic version of the famous painter sympathetically. Bowgen’s Picasso unapologetically grandstands and brags about his genius to every person in the Lapin Agile, yet through Martin’s brand of clever over-the-top comedy, he comes across as so charming and theatrical that we excuse his vices - at first. Picasso, at least, has much less time than Einstein to make it clear that his characterization is a little flat. As the two men meet, the contrast between the self-important Picasso’s brand of sudden creative genius and Einstein’s inaccessible, contemplative genius is so stark that it seems natural for them to completely fail to understand each other. The two men spar verbally in the manner of their genius until, somehow, they embrace each other on a tabletop as brothers. I say ‘somehow’ because this moment of understanding represents a complete 180-degree turn from the passion of their arguments through a single agreement. Perhaps this is, simply, the nature of genius: If so, then this play did not end on its punch line.

“Picasso” is an undeniably well-written, funny comedy; Martin’s name is enough to prove that. The supporting characters, for the most part, have enough nuance to feel as though they are complete people we only see one side of. However, the one-sided near-caricatures of Picasso and Einstein themselves, along with banter filled with references only our parents would understand, set “Picasso” as a play in no way aimed toward college students.

For a play put on by The Old Globe theater, which made its name on Shakespeare performances, “Picasso” is a bit on the edgy, experimental side. But, for experimental plays, “Picasso” is decidedly tame and unsatisfying. It sits in the awkward middle ground between a traditional theatrical performance and the self-aware extravagance of modern risk-taking theater; to attend this play and expect either is a mistake. “Picasso” neither pushes the boundaries far enough to excuse its one-sided characterizations of the main characters, nor takes itself seriously enough to follow through with its explorations of genius. Its surreal events seem surreal for its own sake, and they seem to be played for fan-service rather than for meaning. To a fringe-theater newcomer, though, “Picasso” might be a perfect introduction to theater which comments on itself and breaks the fourth wall when the opportunity strikes. It is, if nothing else, successful comedy.



Photo by Jim Cox

Analysis Tools

Things to Think About Prior to Performance

- Who decides what counts as genius? Can you think of someone who was dismissed in their own time and celebrated later, or the reverse?
- Is inspiration something you are born with, or something you chase down?
- Are art and science opposites, or are they asking the same questions?
- Have you ever felt like you were living through a moment that would be remembered? What did that feel like?
- What is the difference between confidence and delusion?
- Who are the people who supported you before you were "anybody"?

Things to Watch For in Performance

- Notice the set. How does the idea of an "unfinished painting" show up in the space?
- Listen for anachronisms in the sound and music. When does the play break its own rules?
- Watch how characters talk directly to the audience. How does that change your relationship to the story?
- Compare Picasso's and Einstein's physical lives. How does each move, sit, drink, and flirt?
- Pay attention to the Visitor's entrance. How do lighting and sound make it feel impossible?
- Track Germaine and Suzanne. When do they see more clearly than the men around them?

Things to Think About After the Performance

- Who was the true genius in the room? Did your answer change over the evening?
- Did the play convince you that art and science are "two paths to the same truth"?
- Why do you think Martin chose the Visitor he did? What kind of genius does he represent?
- Which character would you most like to have a drink with, and why?
- What do we owe the people who loved us before we were anybody?
- Is genius timeless, or just well preserved by the culture that outlives it?

Other Analysis Tools

- What happens in the very last moments of the play? What is said, and how does that wrap up the characters' arcs and thematic elements?
- Consider the title, *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*. How does it encapsulate the essence of the characters, the setting, and the theme of the play? Why do you think Martin chose this title to reflect the world of the play?

Additional Information

The running time for this production is approximately eighty minutes, without an intermission.

Please join us for a pre-show discussion Thursday, October 8 at 5:45pm in MAC 117, known as the lounge or “fishbowl”, preceding the preview performance. Note that the pre-show discussions will include the director and designers and will be a discussion on the approach to this production.

There will also be a post-show discussion following the Friday, October 16 performance. The post-show will be with the director, cast, and crew, and we will be fielding questions from the audience.

Please join us!



Publicity Photo for College of DuPage’s College Theater’s Fall 2026 Production of *Picasso at the Lapin Agile*
Costume Design by Kim Morris
Pictured (from Left to Right): Lucien Feldman as Albert Einstein and Eli Rodriguez as Pablo Picasso