

Cultural Daily

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Archduke: Laughing All the Way to War

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 10th, 2017

Given the wild political winds blowing across the globe, it's propitious that a play with the title *Archduke*, referring to Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este and the Austro-Hungarian empire, would find its way to the stage. And it's no surprise that it landed at L.A.'s Mark Taper Forum, since this Rajiv Joseph world premiere was commissioned by Center Theatre Group.

The play's central impulse is the 1914 assassination of the Archduke and his wife Sophie in Sarajevo, sparking a chain of events that led to World War I. Given the loaded subject, the real surprise is that this *Archduke* is a very funny and richly entertaining comedy. You read that right.

You might say that Joseph's *Guards at the Taj*, seen at the Geffen Playhouse in 2015 (and impossible to forget), paved the way for this. It, too, was concerned with insignificance as a trigger for violence and was the perfect introduction to this playwright's gift for mixing satirical tragedy with clowning. If *Taj* showed us how two lowly guards can become the unwitting tools of devastating political machinations, what might one expect from *Archduke*, a play dealing with political assassination? A laff riot...?

Try *The Three Stooges go to Sarajevo* or *How Vladimir and Estragon Plus One Meet Godzilla*, because there's more than a whiff of Samuel Beckett in Joseph's lost boys. The descriptions fit.

Joseph's plays never seem to become what you think they're going to be. It is this writer's special genius. You barely have to scratch *Archduke*'s surface to find the darkness under the funny. But, hey, tell me what stings sharper than dark comedy? Good plays locate the universal in the topical and, better than a thousand sermons, point to how a single really stupid thing can lead to another, lead to another... And wars begin.

Archduke posits that in the early 20th century, when tuberculosis was widespread and fatal, three down-and-out consumptive Serbian yokels might be the ideal choice to carry out the assassination of Franz Ferdinand. That, at least, is the diabolical perception of Dragutin "Apis" Dimitrijevic, a bully of an army captain (played by a gleefully stentorian Patrick Page), whose inflated ego and mean-spiritedness see these boys as logical fodder to sacrifice on the altar of Slavic nationalism. What have they got to lose that's not lost already? So why not use *them* to carry out the tricky business of assassination by offering them the things they crave the most and haven't got: food and a lot of glory in the name of patriotism and martyrdom.



l-r: Stephen Stocking and Todd Weeks in Rajiv Joseph's *Archduke*.

Details aside, the rest of this unsparing satire is spent brainwashing these benighted lads into believing that it's the perfect thing for them to do since it will also deliver such a heroic outcome. (As Apis assures them, "Knowledge weighs you down like stones," a seemingly pervasive belief among all higher-ups.)

History has already given us the ending of this story, but it's the getting there that matters and it takes us on one of the wildest, most pleasurable and imaginative theatrical rides this side of, well, *Guards at the Taj*. Joseph possesses a limitless capacity for comic invention and director Giovanna Sardelli knows how to do it justice with smart and sure-footed staging. Sardelli and Joseph share a history of working well together, displaying a wicked unity of creative ideas that deliver enviable results.

Their casting is also serendipitous. The three young men who play the stooges are distinct individuals. Stephen Stocker as Gavrilo Princip, the guy historically who pulled the trigger that changed the world, is a delightfully Chaplinesque bumpkin, while Ramiz Monsef is blustery and sentimental as the fretful Trifko, and Josiah Bania's Nedeljko is an engagingly timid and tender coward.

Todd Weeks has the straightest role as Dr. Leko, the unfortunate medic whose fate it is to treat these young men, while also seeing right through Apis' nefarious ploys, even if he's powerless to foil them. The final character in this comedic stew is that of the sloth-like slovenly Sladjana, the most mysterious of the lot. She's Apis' elderly maid, a poor relative perhaps, who slithers in and out of his quarters dishing out food, drink, wry comments and occasionally a piece of savvy advice for the young men Apis is working to enlist. Joanne McGee plays her with a winning — and wily — deadpan flair.



Stephen Stocking and Joanne McGee in Rajiv Joseph's *Archduke*?

The costumes by Denitsa Bliznakova, Lap Chi Chu's lighting and Tim Mackabee's simple scenic design serve the play well, especially when it comes to the luxury train car that carries the boys to Sarajevo. The large map that covers a wall in the Captain's quarters also serves the audience, by pointing out exactly where in the world this action is taking place. Daniel Kluger's sound design, on the other hand, could be more balanced; some voices carry better than others and Sladjana is often too soft-spoken for the colorful ripostes she gets to deliver.



On the train: l-r, Ramiz Monsef, Josiah Bania and Stephen Stocking in Rajiv Joseph's *Archduke*?

That old coot Otto Bismarck, largely responsible for the unification of Germany that preceded the Sarajevo disaster, was reportedly quoted late in life saying that "One day the great European War will come out of some damned foolish thing in the Balkans." It did. And now you know which one.

Taking the longer and wider view from the top of the 21st century, it may be worth noting that many similar "damned foolish things" have triggered many more wars, one after the other, ever since. And it's not over yet.

Top image: l-r: Stephen Stocking, Patrick Page, Ramiz Monsef and Josiah Bania in the world

premiere of Rajiv Joseph's Archduke.

Photos by Craig Schwartz.

WHAT: *Archduke*

WHERE: Mark Taper Forum, 135 No. Grand Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90012.

WHEN: Tuesdays-Fridays, 8pm; Saturdays, 2:30 & 8pm; Sundays, 1 & 6:30pm. Ends June 4.

HOW: Tickets: \$25–\$95 (subject to change), available online at CenterTheatreGroup.org, at (213) 628-2772 or in person at the Center Theatre Group box office. Groups: (213) 972-7231. Deaf community: Info & charge at CenterTheatreGroup.org/ACCESS.

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