Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dancing Rings Around Gertrude

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 18th, 2019

Is it a play? Is it a dance? Is it a play dance will enhance? Or is it a playful pre-Seussical Stein-ussical meussical with fleeting meetings of Gertrudish words?

The latter, methinks.

Time and distance have not been kind to Gertrude Stein, who is remembered more as an eccentric writer of catchphrases we can't forget than as a valuable contributor to the nation's body of unforgettable literature. But the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble (OTE) has found a way.

In the ambitious enterprise of celebrating its 50 continuous years in the business of adventurous theatre, OTE has embarked on reviving some of its earliest hits, *In Circles* among them. This 1968 musical adaptation by composer Al Carmines of Stein's *Circular Play* is a start in a season dubbed, appropriately enough, "Circa '69." It all began for the Odyssey circa 1969 and, beginning with this production, the 2019-2020 season promises more revisited productions and memorable moments from the feisty early years of the OTE's existence.

The cast of *In Circles* at the Odyssey Theatre.

So here we are. Aside from wantonly stringing together words that one assumes pleased her, whether to others they made sense or not (mostly not), Gertrude Stein got away with them. Her own brother Leo Stein didn't think much of her written meanderings. Some of her contemporaries were nonplussed. Others were outspoken. And still others, with no documented evidence, claimed her way of writing was a reflection of a difficulty in expressing herself well verbally.

We'll never know and so much for that. Because what makes the current OTE revival of *In Circles* enjoyable is not an expectation that it should make sense, but that it should entertain. And that it does. It all lies in its conception by Carmines and in its execution, which in this case rests primarily with director David Schweizer.

It felt especially good to welcome back the highly creative Schweizer, who was a prominent figure in Los Angeles theatre circles in the 1970s, before deciding to move east and use some of his energy directing opera as well as theatre (something he continues to do).

When he agreed to take on this *In Circles*, Schweizer did two smart things: he invited choreographer Kate Coleman and musical director Kenneth J. Grimes (who's happily at the piano

in this production) to come along and help him shape the ride. Together, they then sought out a multi-talented *young* cast of individually admirable actor/singers.

The inspired exception in this production was the casting of the eloquent Jacque Lynn Colton, whom the creators invited to resume the role of Gertrude Stein that she had originated off-Broadway in the Carmines production. Colton delivers it here almost ceremonially, with a patient and benevolent dignity that one strongly suspects the real Gertrude Stein would never have managed to muster.

l-r, P.T. Mahoney, Henry Arber & Jacque Lynn Colton in *In Circles* at the Odyssey Theatre.

Beyond this, there is no describing *In Circles*, which does pretty much what its title suggests. Beyond Stein as the anchor, the cast of three women (Shelby Corley, Ashlee Dutson, Chloe Haven) and four men (Henry Arber, Kyle G. Fuller, Aaron Jung and the vocally richly gifted P.T. Mahoney) perform in circles and criss-crossing lines, their choreographed movement stretching, contracting and expanding in a manner suggestive of dance, even when it falls just short of dance as choreographed movement. All is executed with skill and the singing of many enchanting voices that crucially raise aloft the nonsequitur text.

Predictably—wait for it—there is no there there. No linear plot and not much trackable anything that offers any semblance of one. The result makes for a kind of well-curated vacancy, entirely sustained by these talented artists. The impression, correctly, is that of a period piece playing out of its time, yet faithfully and lovingly representing it.

Top image: The cast of In Circles *at the Odyssey Theatre.*

Photos by Enci Box

WHAT: *In Circles*

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 So. Sepulveda, Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025.

WHEN: Fridays & Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 2pm. Ends Nov. 10.
Added performances, 8pm, 9/26, 10/16 & 10/23 only.

HOW: Tickets $32-$37, available at odysseytheatre.com or by phone at 310.477.2055 ext. 2.

- “Tix for $10” available for performances on 9/20, 10/16 & 11/01 only.
- 10/11: “College Night,” includes pre-performance student reception with themed catering & post-performance discussion. $10 with valid student ID (use promo code COLLEGE).
  • Discounted tickets available at select performances for seniors, students & patrons under 30. Call 310.477.2055 ext. 2 for details.

PARKING: On the Odyssey lot, $5. Some street parking.

RUNNING TIME: One hour, 30 minutes. No intermission.

CORRECTION: Friends, it pains me to say this but I lied. Uninentionally, which is no excuse. In today's review of *In Circles* above, I made some assertions that prove to be wrong.

First, the Odyssey has never previously produced *In Circles*. Second, Jacque Lynn Colton did not play Gertrude Stein in the off-Broadway original. There was no Gertrude Stein. Colton, who was an ingénue at the time, played the ingénue Mildred, currently performed at the Odyssey by Chloe Haven. Adding Gertrude was director David Schweizer's way of acknowledging Colton's early connection to the show by creating the role for her.

Finally, the Odyssey's Founding Artistic Director Ron Sossi has not previously produced any of the shows to be featured in the upcoming Circa '69 season, except for *The Serpent*, which he directed in 1969 and will direct again in 2020. The Circa '69 season consists of some plays seminal at the time of the Odyssey's founding, but not seminal to the Odyssey.

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