Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Holding the Man: The Fire Next Time

Sylvie · Wednesday, May 21st, 2014

There is a bright new company in town. It has come all the way from Down Under, and nabbed no less than the eminent acting coach Larry Moss to direct its very first Los Angeles presentation, *Holding the Man*.

If you haven't heard of this play, don't worry. No one else around here has. Australia is apparently further away than we thought, because *Holding the Man* was reportedly a huge hit in Australia. The play chronicles the story of a 15-year same-sex relationship between Timothy Conigrave and John Caleo — real people — who first met and fell in love in the 1970s at an all-boy school in Melbourne, even though John was captain of the football team and Tim was a cocky artistic type with a huge crush on the Big Guy.

Like most love affairs, this was a roller coaster ride, but as it lasted, it strengthened. Tragically, both young men became early victims of AIDS and died in the early 1990s. Conigrave (who survived Caleo by three years) wrote a widely popular best-selling memoir detailing their up-and-down story. It was adapted for the stage by Tommy Murphy and became a long-running and hugely successful production in Australia.

If we are to believe the founders of the newly formed Australian Theatre Company (aka ATC), *Holding the Man* is the first of many theatrical ventures for them on this side of the Pacific, and this production is a sure-footed start for their promising company.

But. Yes, there is a but.

Theatrical productions are very sensitive plants. It has been my experience that a hit in one theatre can droop when transplanted to another — and I am talking from one part of a *city* to another, let alone one continent (and culture) to another. So if you detect a slight reservation in my praise, don't misunderstand. It has less to do with the work on stage (which is of high quality) than the possible effects of distance in miles and deep water.

We have seen a number of AIDS plays and films in the U.S. that have made the same poignant points and driven home a similar anguishing fallout of the AIDS scourge. These have come in a variety of media and accounts, in books, on stage, in movies. One of the very first and best plays, recently revived in a sterling Los Angeles production, is Larry Kramer's *The Normal Heart*. It remains perhaps the most intensely angry, agonizing and fearsome screed on the subject. Tom

Hanks' harrowing performance in *Philadelphia* is a close, quieter yet devastating second. Most recently and in a very different context, we had the rabble-rousing, Oscar-winning *Dallas Buyers' Club* with Matthew McConaughey and Jared Leto in indelible performances.

Holding the Man, while inventive in its theatrical uses of a life-size puppet to impersonate a person at death's door, its multiplicity of actors in a series of cross-gender performances, even in its *outré* comic (but extraneous) scene of boys masturbating as they defiantly try out speaking a forbidden four-letter word as a rite of passage — all of that has a slightly dated feel.

We have seen this scenario before in somewhat different trappings. And while I take nothing away from the performers at The Matrix — especially not from the excellent work of Adam J. Yeend (John) and Nate Jones (Tim) who do the show's heaviest lifting and do it well (Jones is also one of the show's producers and a founder of the company) — there is, ultimately, a disappointing absence of deep emotion and surprise.

(l-r) Nate Jones and Adam J.Yeend in Holding the Man

As well staged and executed as it is, *Holding the Man* feels tame. This does not refer to knowing how the story ends, but to how it is told. Perhaps because it is based on an original narrative (the memoir form), it is short on probing or exciting dramatic structure. Part of the problem is the sketchiness of the subordinate characters, the parents and friends of the two central figures, often sacrificed when adapting a long form to a shorter one. They are sometimes funny, but basically marginal and lightly penciled in. There is no sharp pain passed on to us, the audience, no gripping "aha" moments in the script. The many touching ones dig down, but not as deep as we would wish.

Is this response just a matter of cultural divide or misperception? Is it brought on by all that separates our continents? By our American *ennui* after so much exposure to vibrant other takes on the same subject? Is it because the threat of death by AIDS has receded (though not disappeared) with the advent of better treatment options?

Perhaps, but not entirely. We still need more flesh on the theatrical bones in which to sink our teeth. I wanted to be drawn more into the lives of these amiable, doomed and struggling boys. I wanted to feel what they were feeling, be more involved and not just watch it all at a safe distance.

Because, whatever else you may have heard, theatre is not a spectator sport. It is participatory. I hope to find it more so next time.

CODA: An experiment in cross-continent transplantation is also occurring with playwright Stephen Sachs' *Bakersfield Mist*, a play that opens Tuesday at The Duchess Theatre in London's West End. It is, if anything, an even larger risk, given that it is a two-hander involving one idiosyncratically American character: a swell example of that native species known as trailer trash. While there is grave danger in any and all comparisons, it will be interesting to see what one culture thinks of another culture's branded esoterica. Stay tuned.

WHAT: *HOLDING THE MAN*

Australian Theatre Company @ The Matrix Theatre

WHERE: 7657 Melrose Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90046

WHEN: Thursdays – Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays 3pm; ends June 29.

HOW: 323-960-7735; all tickets: $34.99. Tickets: Click here.

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