Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Not Altogether Happy

Sylvie · Wednesday, February 28th, 2018

The Happiest Song Plays Last, the third and final installment of Quiara Alegría Hudes' *Elliot Trilogy*, opened this past weekend at the Los Angeles Theatre Center, to mixed results. In this three-parter (the first two plays were presented by Center Theatre Group, this last one by the Latino Theatre Company), Elliot has gone from being in the marines (*Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue* at the Kirk Douglas), to returning to an aimless civilian life (*Water By the Spoonful* at the Mark Taper), to *Happiest Song*, wherein Elliot (played this time by Peter Pasco), has relocated to Hollywood where he has been hired as an advisor, later to take on the lead, in a war movie filming in Jordan.

Peter Pasco & Vaneh Assadourian in The Latino Theatre Company's production of The Happiest Song Plays Last.

Jordan is where we find him. He's in good company. With him in the desert set are Shar (Vaneh Assadourian), a smart American actress descended of such a stew of mixed blood that she considers herself a "nothing," and Ali (Kamal Marayati), an honest and wily Iraqi who fled the violence in his country with his wife and children, but is missing "papers" for legal residence in Jordan; he dodges artfully to live and work without getting caught and deported.

Vaneh Assadourian & Kamal Marayati in The Latino Theatre Company's production of *The Happiest Song Plays Last.*

At home in Philadelphia, meanwhile, Elliot's cousin Yaz (Elisa Bocanegra) keeps the family homestead kitchen humming, sharing her cooking with the neighborhood, feeding a homeless straggler, and rekindling a longstanding relationship with the handsome Agustin (Al Rodrigo), a musician and former teenage crush who can pluck the Puerto Rican *cuatro* as nimbly as he does her heartstrings.

What's interesting about observing all three parts of the trilogy in such close time proximity to one another is how differently each production triggers the reaction to each play. *Soldier's Fugue*, which tracks Elliot's experiences with the marines, interweaves his father's combat experiences in Vietnam and his grandfather's in Korea with his own in Iraq. (Click here to read the review.)

Of the three plays, this one emerges as the most smoothly integrated and satisfying piece of dramatic writing. It is also the most poetic, elliptical and driven, with good forward motion and no

wasted gestures in Shishir Kurup's skillful staging.

Water By the Spoonful, which won the Pulitzer Prize, is the most focused on the fallout from Elliot's traumatic North Philadelphia childhood, though it suffers slightly from Hudes' tendency to cram more into one play than it wants to hold and, at the Taper, from a production badly wounded by uneven casting and flawed directorial choices. (Click here to read the review.)

Elisa Bocanegra & Al Rodrigo in The Latino Theatre Company's production of *The Happiest Song Plays Last.*

But it is *Happiest Song,* the most lighthearted of the three, that can lay claim to also being the most self-indulgent. It is burdened with too much extraneous material, as if the writer wanted to get in every final lick she could before the final bell.

Hudes knows how to create interesting characters, possessed of humor and bathos and other lovable traits. Ali and Shar are characters who capture attention with innate good sense, as well as a good sense of humor. But Hudes also can make them go off on rants, monologues on pet subjects that derail the rhythm of the play and wreck its pacing.

Kamal Marayati in The Latino Theatre Company's production of *The Happiest Song Plays Last*.

This happens mostly in the second half of *Happiest Song,* a play that takes place in 2010, at the start of the Arab Spring, and finds Elliot determined to travel to Cairo for no better reason than his desire to witness the excitement in Tahrir Square. What does this have to do with the play? Nothing. This journey — which remains off stage — is not only unrealistic given the ramifications of the political moment, but it's totally extraneous and injures the play's momentum. (Ironically, we hear about how great revolutions can be, but not a word about how spectacularly this particular one failed.) This kind of distraction may provide an opportunity for the playwright to mouth off about her convictions, but it does her play no favors.

Somewhat the same can be said of a poetic monologue by Agustin on the enchantments of the music of Puerto Rico and its legendary Ramito. (Nelson González provides the accompaniment on his *cuatro.*) Exalted in isolation, such a speech might work, but at this length and in the context of this story, it's an interruption. Tender affection for the beleaguered island and its people is also exploited, presumably by director Edward Torres, with an overlong musical slideshow showing us the folks of rural Puerto Rico that simply overstays its welcome. Taking a careful scalpel to the writing, and resisting the temptation to tie up every loose end might have been a more profitable way to go.

Technically speaking, however, the production has other problems that these showstoppers only exacerbate. The major one is a sluggish pace and awkward scene changes and, at the performance I attended, light cues that were slightly off their mark. At the very least, the production needs to pull itself together if it is to deliver a more involving experience.

Top image: l-r, Elisa Bocanegra (in background),Vaneh Assadourian, Peter Pasco & Kamal Marayati in The Latin Theater Company's production of Quiara Alegria Hudes' The Happiest

Song Plays Last.

Photos by Gio Solis.

WHAT: ***The Happiest Song Plays Last***

WHERE: Los Angeles Theatre Center, 514 So Spring Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013.

WHEN: Fridays & Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3pm; Mondays 7:30pm. Ends March 19.

HOW: Tickets $24-$52, available at www.thelatc.com or 866.811.4111. Groups: 213.489.0994.

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