Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Roguish Penelope, a Starry Romeo and Juliet

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 16th, 2014

If theatre is an addictive and slippery phenomenon of our own invention, you might think of a person like myself, who's been covering theatre for a long time, as addicted. But you'd be wrong. Now that I no longer am under obligation to see shows I do not *choose* to see, I am a lot more selective. Harold Clurman was right when he said "the history of the theatre is the history of bad plays." I'll vouch for it. But I've also been lucky enough to have seen those rare productions that leave you lying awake at night in a state of wonder, as if you'd never set foot in a theatre before and thought you'd already seen everything, until….

The award-winning Irish playwright Enda Walsh's *Penelope* at the Rogue Theatre offers something of both kinds of events. This effulgent and barely coherent Irish take on Homer's *The Odyssey*, is peppered with witty accents plundered from TV's "The Dating Game" (and endless other stuff) and lacerated by some pretty dark visceral interaction. Director Jon Perrin Flynn calls the play a "microcosm of the geopolitics of human experience" and a meditation that asks if "human love can save us from human greed." Maybe. There is no single answer and no catching up to Walsh's racing mind, with its byways, digressions and left turns. You'll have to draw your own conclusions. But crazily coherent or not, some of the time or not, the 95-minute Rogue production does leave you… breathless. It also — surprise — leaves you laughing, here and there anyway.

Brian Letscher and Ron Bottita preening in *Penelope*

Flynn's fearless direction coupled with bold performances from Ron Bottita, Richard Fancy, Brian Lescher and Scott Sheldon as the beleaguered suitors to the enigmatic Penelope (Holly Fulger in a silent role) keep you watching. You'll have to accept some of the production's ragged edges, which are always easier to overlook in an effort as complex and demanding as this one. (The Rogue also presented a memorable production of Walsh's *The Electric Ballroom* a couple of seasons ago that was my vivid introduction to this theatre.) And if the piece capitulates to a conventional speech on the power of love as its crowning resolution, after quizzically comical pleas for Penelope's favors by each of those suitors (along with a good deal of spilled blood), you mind it less because the journey getting there has been over such a minefield of emotion.

How can you not respect the small Rogue for taking on these kinds of chances on a relative shoestring and accepting the full consequences, economic and other, of that decision? It lives up to

its mission as a theatre of ideas and, yes, plenty of imagination. I can recommend *Penelope* chiefly to people who enjoy the adventure of doing the work that such an extravagant and complicated play demands — and who, after all the tongue-in-cheek wit, can take the violent twists of its conclusion. This play is not what you'd call a picnic, but it is engrossing and it is playing in the right theatre.

If it's a picnic you're looking for, well, this is July, which means Shakespeare out of doors, and Shakespeare Center Los Angeles has again turned on the lights in the Japanese Garden on the grounds of the VA in West Los Angeles with a lively, straight ahead production of *Romeo and Juliet* on a bit of a diet.

With some trimming of the text and shedding of a character or two, and not a stick of furniture on stage, the production manages to retain the flavor and, above all, the vigor and clarity of this play. Its nonspecific period and nontraditional casting offer some pleasant surprises, none greater than Kimberly Scott's full bore embrace of the comic opportunities offered by the role of Juliet's nurse, even when some of them reach well over the top. (Hey, it's summer, let's have fun.)

There also is pleasure to be found in Gregory Linington's unsentimental philosopher as Mercutio, in Elijah Alexander's stern but loving father as Capulet, and in Michael Manuel as a paternal yet pragmatic Friar Lawrence. Removing the sanctimony from this character makes the man and his cockeyed decisions a lot more human and acceptable.

Jack Mikesell and Christina Elmore in *Romeo and Juliet*

In the titular roles, Christina Elmore delivers a smart, grounded as well as lissome Juliet who does not suffer fools, and if Jack Mikesell's Romeo is still a hotheaded wimp, so be it. You can blame it on Shakespeare who created him that way.

Director Kenn Sabberton has chosen to cut the post mortem reconciliation speeches of the families at the end of the play. He should have found a way to leave them in, not just out of loyalty to the author, but out of the needed redemption they provide. The production concludes abruptly without them. Still, it's an enjoyable evening under the stars that can, yes, be preceded by a picnic at tables on the grounds (you may bring your own or buy one) in the very best tradition of summer Shakespeare.

As you may have gathered, this riff on *Penelope* and *R&J*, is also an opportunity to talk about the curious act of reviewing theatre at all. Setting aside the notion that reviews are designed to monetize the value of the theatrical experience for a reading public, good criticism should always try to measure a production's less quantifiable emotional rewards. That is always harder to come by, but in their wildly disparate ways, both *Penelope* and *Romeo and Juliet* deliver on their individual promise of an experience worth your time — and, hopefully, your money.

PENELOPE

WHEN: 8pm Fridays & Saturdays; 3pm on Sundays, through August 10

WHERE: Rogue Machine, 5041 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90019.

TICKETS: $30 @ 855-585-5185 or www.roguemachinetheatre.com

ROMEO AND JULIET

WHEN: Tuesday through Sunday, 8 pm, through July 26

Gates Open at 6:30 for pre-show picnics

WHERE: Japanese Garden at the Los Angeles VA Healthcare Campus

11301 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles CA 90073

TICKETS: $20, $49, or premium $70 (includes box dinner)

@ 213.893.8293 or visit www.shakespearecenter.org

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