

BACK STAGE WEST

July 28, 2005

PERA PALAS

at the Theatre@Boston Court

Reviewed by Melinda Schupmann

Sinan Ünel's play might be best to see three times. The first would be to admire at length the iconographic historical and social links Tom Buderwitz incorporates into his artistically elegant set. Its Byzantine religious mosaic, commanding figure of Atatürk, Turkish landmarks, nod to the Orient Express, and even the familiar golden arches of McDonald's span the time period of the production: post-World War I, the 1950s, and the present. As scenes unfold, each image visually augments the playwright's dialogue.

The second and third visits would be to see the 10 actors playing 26 nongender-specific roles, a collaboration between the Antaeus Company and the Theatre@Boston Court. With an impressive cast on opening night, it could only be hoped any visit would provide the same solid teamwork.

REVIEWS

The setting is the Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul, once frequented by kings and distinguished travelers on the Orient Express, notably Agatha Christie and Jacqueline Kennedy. Ünel's story is an intricate web of overlapping characters and personal dilemmas from each period. One thread concerns an English woman (Jeanie Hackett) whose stay in a pasha's harem at the fall of the Ottoman Empire leads her to champion independence for women. Another views the evolution of an American woman's marriage to a Turk (Deborah Puette, Ramón De Ocampo). The third observes a gay man and his lover (Daniel Bess, Bill Brochtrup) meeting his family after a long estrangement over his homosexuality. The ensemble is rounded out by Apollo Dukakis, Melinda Peterson, Angela Goethals, Mikael Salazar, and Rebecca Mozo.

The script's overlapping stories—laced with humor, anger, and pathos—are engrossing. Director Michael Michetti humanizes the polemic to great effect, though some characters border on caricature. Brochtrup suffers from an effete flamboyancy and the tourist complaint for much longer than necessary, but he is very affecting as the pasha's son. Mozo is outstanding as the pasha's optimistic daughter waiting to be married, and Hackett's feminist idealism seems palpably real. The generously built Dukakis is worth a giggle as a harem wife and as the mother of the Turkish bridegroom.

The production values, several fine performances, and ambitious storytelling by the playwright elevate this multithemed exploration beyond the ordinary. Though flawed, its risks pay off with clever theatricality and intellectual stimulation.

"Pera Palas," presented by the Theatre@Boston Court and the Antaeus Company at the Theatre@Boston Court, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena. Thu.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 2 & 7 p.m. Jul. 23-Aug. 28. \$30. (626) 683-6883.



photo by John Apicella

Talkin' turkey: Melinda Peterson, Jeanie Hackett, and Bill Brochtrup in *Pera Palas*.