

THE Many LOVES OF Antonia the Scrivener



Three fiction all-stars take the stage

By Don Shirley

Three American fiction all-stars, who aren't generally considered playwrights, are suddenly represented on the L.A. stage. *American Tales* (adapted from Mark Twain and Herman Melville) and *My Antonia* (Willa Cather) share odd plot similarities – both productions involve attorney narrators and characters who travel west across America en route to San Francisco. Both are also presented under the banner of the Festival of New American Musicals – even though *My Antonia* isn't a musical.

Michele K. Short

Yet the differences are conspicuous. *American Tales* is a pair of one-act musical gems, totaling about two hours, based on two of the slimmer stories by the great authors – Twain's *The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence* and *Rosannah Ethelton* and Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. *My Antonia*, by contrast, condenses Cather's much longer novel into three acts – and three hours.

American Tales is easily the more provocative. It offers two radically different glimpses of the American experience.

Twain's 1878 story, like his most famous novels, is a far-fetched adventure story with comic sparkle. Twain foretold a day when people would talk to each other from opposite sides of the country on the newly invented telegraph. Alonzo in Maine and Rosannah in San Francisco, hitherto total strangers, get their wires crossed and begin a serendipitous cross-country romance. But Rosannah's California suitor tries to foil the long-distance lovers. The narrative goes on a wild coast-to-coast-and-back-again ride, with zany layovers in Fresno and Honolulu.

Bartleby, unlike Melville's more celebrated *Moby Dick*, is an anti-adventure story about trapped souls. Onstage, it suggests the theater of the absurd – a century early (in 1853, although it appears updated here by a few decades). A new clerk at a sedate Wall Street law office begins to resist his orders from the boss with the simple words "I would prefer not to." Soon he's doing no work, camping out overnight in the office, and roiling the inner life of his boss, who eventually learns the bleak details of *Bartleby's* background.

Co-directed by Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber, with a book by Ken Stone, the masterful Antaeus production alternates performances between two sets of actors, with each set tackling both Twain and Melville. The actors I saw (Devon Sovari, Daniel Blinkoff, Richard Miro, Paul Eiding and Phil Proctor), accompanied by a three-piece band, easily handled a 19th-century-influenced score by Jan Powell (music) and Stone (lyrics), which adds dramatic heft and witty verse to the originals. My only objection was that *Bartleby* takes place on the same Laura Fine Hawkes set that's fitting only for the Twain story.

My Antonia has more realistic, familiar plot components. The title character is a Bohemian (as in Bohemia, not as in avant-garde) teenager (Shiva Rose) who arrives with her family in Nebraska in 1884, just as Jim Burden, a Virginia lad (Michael Redfield), is moving to his grandparents' farm after the death of his parents. The middle-aged Jim (Kevin Kilner) narrates their story of ultimately thwarted friendship and romance – although, as in many staged novels, other actors also take turns bouncing Jim's narration around the stage.

Scott Schwartz's adaptation has much of the sweep and poignancy of an old-fashioned page-turner, emphasized by Stephen Schwartz's incidental music (performed live by a pianist and violinist). The script erases the information that Antonia is a few years older than Jim, intensifying the romance. The emotional connection is greater than in the 2003 staging by A Noise Within of Cather's *O Pioneers!* Antonia has one glaring but easily fixed flaw – the first act includes material about other, Russian immigrants that's slightly confusing and totally expendable.

My Antonia is a co-production of Ventura's Rubicon Theatre, where it played before moving to the smaller Pacific Resident Theatre in Venice – the kind of partnership between two local theaters that serves audiences and artists alike.

American Tales, *My Antonia*, *Antaeus*, 3660 Wilshire Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90010. Contact: (310) 471-1111.

My Antonia, Pacific Resident Theatre, Venice, (310) 312-2127. Contact: Benjamin Derman@prtc.com