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'Pera Palas' juggles well

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Turkey, by sheer dint of location has always seemed to clash with itself. Placed on the very boundary between Europe and Asia, invaded over the centuries by civilizations from either side, Turkey's culture has seemed the consummate image of Eastern mystery, yet operated in intimate contact with the West. In this past century, after massacre and war, all its tradition upturned overnight. The results have offered both promise and frustration.

The last provides the central images of Sinan Unel's compelling "Pera Palas," now at the Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena. The play, which interweaves stories from three distinct periods of the 20th century, works to show the difficult, and always righteous nature of change. It becomes the tale of a country, but also of individual human nature and the better angels for which we all reach.

The three pieces interweave, appearing in quick succession – sometimes simultaneously – in and around the westernized Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul. Ten actors create all the many characters, leaping from time period to time period with deceptive ease. To tie the parts together, two characters, from each time period make their way – older and played by someone else – to the next.

The stories prove consistently compelling. First, just after World War I, an Englishwoman encounters the insular life of the harem, even as she embraces those forcible modernizations will do away with the harem world. Second, in the giddy post-war '50s, an American schoolteacher falls for a young Turkish man whose hopes hang on a U.S.-Turkish friendship that may not reach as far as equality in romance or the job market. Finally, in the early '90s, a young Turkish photographer returns from the U.S. to try to make peace with his family, and the city of his birth.

The cast are all members of the highly respected Antaeus Company, and on any given night you may see any combination of the 20 actors who have been double-cast in the ten roles. Opening night saw standout performances by everyone, but most particularly Bill Brochtrup in the dual roles of a pasha's son and a modern American, Daniel Bess as the modern Turk out to recover his roots, Rebecca Mozo as a young girl very committed to harem life, Jeannie Hackett is the interfering Englishwoman, and Apollo Dukakis playing both a former idealist whose life has betrayed him, and that character's own mother.