

American Tales

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EDGE Contributor
Wednesday Jul 2, 2008



Entertainment :: Theatre
Los Angeles, CA
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Raphael Sbarge and Peter Van Norden in "Bartleby the Scrivener," the second half of "American Tales" (Source: Michele K. Short)

American Tales is the striking centerpiece of Classicsfest 2008, the Anteaus Company's summer repertory season now onstage at the Deaf West Theater in North Hollywood. Forged from a two year marathon of workshops within the company, the tales are a pair of one-act musicals based on short stories by iconic American writers Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain) and Herman Melville. The intense creative effort involved shows in every superb detail.

Inspired by an early piece of "science fiction" by Mark Twain, the first play of the evening is the more witty and joyful. Like his contemporary Jules Verne, Twain was fascinated by science; its inventions and theories frequently inhabit his stories. As he once noted, "One gets such wholesale returns of conjecture out of such a trifling investment of fact."

In this case, the investment involved his fascination with a new device just showcased at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia and designed to carry voice transmissions over the nation's web of telegraph wires. Twain built a story around this thing, the "telephone," and published "The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton" in the March, 1878 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*.

In it, he imagined a world where someday the new contraption might enable a Maine man to fall hopelessly in love with a woman in San Francisco just by hearing her voice! Presaging a world of technological aids to matchmaking like "eHarmony.com," Twain's story of a chance encounter over the wires soon turns into a madcap romp as the lovestruck Alonzo chases across America seeking his songbird who herself has taken flight to avoid an unwanted suitor.

Composer Jan Powell and playwright/lyricist Ken Stone, along with a superbly talented cast under the masterful direction of Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber, combine the absurdities of melodrama with a pleasing operetta-like score to create a charming milieu for the Twain story, filling it with delights of every sort. Through some mysterious alchemy, the play manages to re-engage our wonder at a device so commonplace and forgettable that we have to be reminded to shut ours off before the curtain rises.

The evening takes a darker turn after intermission with Powell and Stone's musicalization of Herman Melville's brooding 1853 short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" about a young clerk who comes to work for an old lawyer in his "snug little practice" at 38 Wall Street. Over time, Bartleby sinks into a strange existential crisis in which he will do no work, will not leave the premises, and will not communicate his reasons why except to say "I would prefer not to," articulating a polite but resolute rejection of everything outside his own enshrouding despair.

Such a claustrophobic piece of fiction might seem the poorest possible source for a musical, yet it is the transformation itself that rescues Melville's tale from entombment in its dismal and sooty 19th Century world. With the addition of music and sly humor, suddenly Bartleby seems less the tale of introverted nihilism that inspired Albert Camus, and more a wry, caustic allegory of modern life where "preferring not to" is the generative impulse behind the attitude of everyone from bank tellers to clerks at the DMV.

From the simpler harmonies and pleasing lyrical inventions of the Twain piece, Powell and Stone now strike out into musical territory more reminiscent of the stage works of Ned Rorem and Giancarlo Menotti. Employing bitonality, dissonance, and complex melodic structures, composer Powell fashions an enthralling musical score. It's absolutely first rate work, and realized handsomely by pianist/conductor Steven Ladd Jones, violinist Amanda Kopcsak and bassist Jay Rubbottom.

Also first rate are the five performers who breathe life into the five characters of each story. In the Twain piece, Rosannah and Alonzo are played by Devon Sorvari and Daniel Blinkoff. Ms. Sorvari combines a lithe soprano voice with a head-tossing ingénue sauciness perfectly complementing Mr. Blinkoff's earnest, goofy charm and rich baritone. They are nearly upstaged by a housemaid played in drag by John Combs who lurches about and slams Rosannah's front door on unwanted visitors with an enthusiasm that threatens real damage to Laura Fine Hawkes' mirthful set.

Besides Ms. Hawkes' captivating scenic design consisting of geometric walls and floor spaces painted with archaic American maps (so we know where the act one lovers are at any given moment), other excellent design work includes the gorgeous period costumes created by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg and superb lighting by Jose Lopez.

Performances Friday and Saturday nights at 8 p.m., Sundays at 3 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. through August 17. Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd. in North Hollywood. Tickets are available by calling (866) 811-4111 or through www.anteaus.org.

Trevor Thomas has written entertainment features and theater reviews for both *Drama-Logue* and *The Los Angeles Times*.