Pre-9/11 play helps explain post-9/11 world

Transformation and dislocation are powerful themes in Sinan Ünel's sweeping 'Pera Palas.

By Philip Blandis
Special to The Times

In the last hundred years, Turkey has traveled farther along the convulsive path from a static, autocratic ancient society to a modern republic than any other country in the Islamic world. The heavy price of transformation its people paid — and the ongoing clash of civilizations that leaves their future precariously in doubt — are eloquently illuminated in Sinan Ünel's "Pera Palas" at Pasadena's Boston Court Theatre.

From our initial immersion into the visual opulence of the Istanbul hotel environs of the play's title; Michael Michtem's staging impressively integrates the resident Theatre @ Boston Court's first-rate venue and production values with the Antaeus Company's signature classical performance precision.

First produced in 1997, Ünel's sweeping multigenerational drama is a spectacularly modern project for Antaeus, but its historical roots run deep. More important, the play proves remarkably prescient in identifying the cultural, religious and political issues that begot the lack of understanding and mistrust in our post-9/11 world.

This monumental double-cast production features 10 actors in 27 roles representing various nationalities — and, in some cases, cross-gender casting — in three interlocking and overlapping dramas spanning pivotal periods during the 20th century.

In the 1930s, when a Turkish charismatic Turk (Ogul Zulueta, Ramon de Ocampo) as the dearly bought democracy joins NATO in a spirit of cautious hope for rapprochement with the West.

In the 1960s, when a Turkish expatriate photographer (Seamus Dever, Daniel Hess) brings his lover (Daniel Blinkoff, Bill Brochtrup) to meet his estranged family, optimism has given way to disillusionment and the dangerous resurgence of religious fundamentalism. Common characters link the three acts, played by different actors at different stages of life, and the flaws that divide them remain tragically resistant to progress.

Ünel is far too talented a playwright to settle for a mere history lesson. Rather than presenting the stories in chronological order, he overlays them in alternating sequences within each act. In addition to showcasing blocking ingenuity and the performers' versatility (not to mention driving the audience crazy trying to keep the characters and their relationships straight), this dizzying narrative deconstruction evokes the dislocation of an entire people — a powerful denouement of form and theme.

DOUBLE CAST: Jeanie Hackett and Bill Brochtrup are among 10 actors playing 27 roles at Pasadena's Boston Court Theatre.