

CRITIC'S PICK



Photo by: Michele K. Short

American Tales

July 02, 2008

By Les Spindle

Antaeus Company unveils two marvelous adaptations of short stories by Mark Twain and Herman Melville. Composer Jan Powell and librettist-lyricist Ken Stone have fashioned a stylish and enthralling double bill of musicals set in 1890s America, offering literate glimpses at our nation's past that impart surprising contemporary resonance. Co-directors Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber and co-

music directors Steven Ladd Jones and Billy Thompson grace these new works with impeccable premiere renditions, in which some roles are double-cast.

Alexander Graham Bell's once-newfangled invention, the telephone, drives the droll farcical complications in the Twain-based frolic *The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton*. Twain's narrative about a passionate long-distance romance presaged sociological changes effected by technological advances, including the Internet. Lonely Maine bachelor Alonzo (Daniel Blinkoff) meets radiant San Francisco maiden Rosannah (Devon Sorvari) through an accidental crossing of telephone lines, and they immediately fall in love. The culmination of their romance is thwarted by Rosannah's scheming would-be suitor Burley (Raphael Sbarge), but the determined Alonzo ultimately tracks down his ladylove. Blinkoff and Sorvari are wryly amusing and in spectacular voice. The highlight of the lilting score is Sorvari's recurrent ballad "Rosannah's Song." Sbarge is hilarious as the dastardly villain, and fine support comes from John Combs and Peter Van Norden as two kindly matchmakers.

A brilliant adaption of Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* takes us into more cerebral territory. It's an enigmatic tale of urban ennui and the symbiotic effects of human interactions. In a New York law office, a no-nonsense boss (Van Norden) helms "A Snug Little Practice," as described in song by his dutiful but imperfect copy clerks (Combs and Blinkoff) and office boy (Sorvari, in cross-dress). New hire Bartleby (Sbarge) at first seems like the office whiz, but he suddenly becomes resistant to all work, constantly staring at the brick wall outside his window. The boss has great difficulty in reprimanding Bartleby. Both men face

at the brick wall outside his window. The boss has great difficulty in relinquishing Barney. Both men face emotional crises, leading to tragedy. Sbarge and Van Norden give masterful performances, conveying a wealth of character nuances without resorting to simplistic resolutions. The supporting cast is excellent. The haunting score is particularly effective in Sbarge's plaintive evocation of quiet despair in "The Wall."

Presented by the Antaeus Company at Deaf West Theatre,
5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood.

Fri.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 3 & 7:30 p.m. Jun. 27-Aug. 10.

(866) 811-4111. www.antaeus.org.