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Review
CRITIC'S PICK
American Tales

based on the works of Mark Twain and Herman Melville
music by Jan Powell; book and lyrics by Ken Stone
directed by Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber
Antaeus Company
a part of ClassicsFest 2008
Deaf West Theatre, NoHo
through August 10

Do Mark Twain and Herman Melville fit the same bill? Twain's humor is unsurpassed, relying on an abundance of alliterations and other trickery with language. He was a remarkable observer of life... and the human heart. Melville's scenario is darker, of a far more serious vein, but not without a humorous reaction here and there and certainly with a piercingly clear glimpse of the harshness of reality, sort of like the look and texture of Charles Dickens. So, although somewhat distinctive, the two giant American storytellers do well side by side, because they are both so brilliant with...telling an unforgettable story. The Antaeus Co believes this as well, as they present an original world premiere within their Classicsfest 2008: American Tales. It's a memorable evening of fun, fine music and nurturing food for thought.

The first one-act, based on Twain's *The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton* takes us across country in the 1890s from Eastport, Maine to San Francisco with major stops in Fresno, Honolulu and New York City. Its two protagonists Rosannah (Devon Sorvari) and Alonzo (Daniel Blinkoff) meet quite by accident on the telephone, two years after its invention by Bell. The perilous misadventures that follow as the two are manipulated apart at the hands of a nasty villain Burley (Richard Miro), also in love with Rosannah, is hilariously played out, especially by Blinkoff, so magnificent in his depiction of innocence and use of physical comedy. Sorvari has a lovely soprano and the music that accompanies the melodramatic scenes is catchy and always upbeat. The staging here, with its use of slow motion, pratfalls and imaginative handling of props, aids the story a hundred fold.

The second act, Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, a realistic and poignant look at the business world of Wall Street during the Industrial Revolution and its effects on the humanity of its employees is rather brilliantly conveyed with stellar performances from Miro as Bartleby and Peter Van Norden as his repentant boss. Miro's pained silence through his 'perpetual occupancy' is played to perfection. Also worthy of note is Sorvari, delightfully on cue as the mail delivery boy. The musical score is classically based and haunting, and we are left with a reflective memory of man's missed opportunity to save and rehabilitate his fellow man.

Both plays are still relevant, especially Melville's. Homeless people wander the streets of Los Angeles daily – artists who have become misguided and have lost their way. Life passes them by, as do most people who ignore and refuse to get involved. It's a pitiable world!

The staging here is remarkable for a limited space. The direction is fluid throughout, the sets and costumes just right (credit Laura Fine Hawkes and A. Jeffery Schoenberg respectively), the musical accompaniment: sublime (Michael Alfera/Steven Ladd Jones on piano, Amanda Kopesak on violin and Jay Rubbottom on bass)...and the acting, as always, divine. An enjoyable and reflective evening of entertainment!

5 out of 5 stars

Don Grigware, Week of July 7, 2008