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in Los Angeles

Istanbul, aka Constantinople, was the most important city in the world for roughly a thousand years – from about the fourth to the fourteenth centuries - yet most history texts slide quickly over this amazing fact. Pera Palas, enjoying its West Coast premiere at Theatre@Boston Court in Pasadena, doesn't begin its coverage of Istanbul's history until the first years after World War I, but the magnitude of the city's importance and the span and splendor of its cultural heritage weigh heavily on the play's every moment.

Set, eponymously, in Istanbul's most famous (and truly palatial) hotel, the play spreads its focus over three discrete time periods: the postwar dissolution of the Ottoman empire and rise of its modern Turkish republic under Mustafa Kamal (Atatürk) in the early 1920s, the country's first years as a US ally and NATO member at the start of the Cold War in the early 1950s, and the re-emergence of Islamic fundamentalism in the early 1990s. Each era has its own cast (some characters being older versions of their earlier selves) and each period co-exists on stage with the other two, as characters from different eras play out their scenes simultaneously, often onstage and crying out at the same time.

While this may sound like a clever dramaturgical puzzle (where are you, Msrs. Stoppard and Ayckbourn?), it's not, really: the author, Turkish expatriate Sinan Ünü, has skillfully created this work as a dramatic collage of Istanbul/Constantinople's own conflation (talk about "indivisible!"), as a city which quite literally bridges Asia and Europe, and figuratively - as the former capital of both the Byzantine and Ottoman Empires and the terminus of the Orient Express – bridges East and West, Christendom and Islam, classical and medieval, ancient and modern. And looking beyond these geographical, political and theological realms, we also see the deeper social axles that connect (or disconnect) old and new, male and female, sacred and secular.

The play is more panorama than plot: ten actors play Pera's twenty-five roles of roughly the same size; with characters ranging from an actual English journalist (one Evelyn Crawley) to lively fictional ones: a wealthy Pasha, an English diplomat, a harem odalisque, a Turkish expat and his American boyfriend, an American schoolteacher and her younger sister, plus various friends, relatives and servants of all the above. Yet all of them have distinct identities and back-stories and, even when they're speaking at the same, we have a pretty good idea of the moment-to-moment goings-on between them and the transcending arcs of their – and their various countries' - lives. This is all quite impressive, as is the excellent ensemble cast, all of whose members are drawn from the estimable Antaeus Company of Los Angeles, which co-produced with the Boston Court team. Indeed, Antaeus has provided the Boston Court with two casts, each entirely distinct, performing on alternate evenings, and has blatantly bent casting genders as well (a bearded male plays an elderly harem lady), thus clearly prioritizing the play's structural and thematic issues over the urge to create of individually "definitive" performances.

Of the many interwoven relationships in Pera Palas, the most gripping is the infatuation and marriage of idealistic young Turk Orhan and an American girl, Anne, who visits Orhan's Istanbul home in 1952; when, forty years later, Orhan's and Anne's resulting Turkish-American son returns for a visit, the son confronts his older and now-alcoholic father who curses both the American license and Arabic fundamentalism that he sees destroying off his country's gains. Sparks fly aplenty in a final scene where both generations share the stage: young Orhan and his young wife battle in the 20s and old Orhan and his gay son have it out in the 90s, with nary a hair's breadth between them. A few of the issues (and, regrettably, several of the climaxes) are lost in the resulting cacophony, but the point of unending cultural crises thunders home. While revisions that could score both the points and the dramatic thrills would be appreciated, the overall impact, particularly as acted here, is powerful, and its pertinence is vast.

Acting was indeed stunning throughout, particularly, in the performance I saw, by Broadway veteran Harry

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Groaner as the older Orhan, Ramón de Ocampo as the younger one, Mikael Salazar as an old Pasha and Rebecca Mozo as his 15-year-old daughter. The multi-era design (Ottoman ogival patterns punctuated with McDonald's arches) was by Tom Buderwitz scenic, Adam H. Greene lighting, Ivy Y. Chou costumes and Leon Rothenberg sound, and it was outstanding in every respect. A fascinating and thoughtful evening, with confidently assured direction by Michael Michetti.