

THEATER REVIEW

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 BRANDES
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 Michetti's staging impressively integrates the resident Theatre or 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 an atypically 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 beget 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 one, set amid the collapse of the Ottoman Empire in the aftermath of World War I, a well-intentioned crusading English feminist (Gigi Bermingham, Jeanie Hackett) undermines the centuries-old subjugation of women in a traditional household only to leave chaos in its wake.

A 1950s story line traces a cross-cultural romance between an American teacher (Tamara Krinsky, Angela Goethals) and a



JOHN APICELLA

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

charismatic Turk (Ogie Zulueta, Ramon de Ocampo) as the dearly bought democracy joins NATO in a spirit of cautious hope for rapprochement with the West.

In the 1990s, when a Turkish

expatriate photographer (Seamus Deaver, Daniel Bess) brings his lover (Daniel Bilinkoff, Bill Brochtrup) to meet his estranged family, optimism has given way to disillusionment and the dangerous resurgence of reli-

'Pera Palas'

Where: Boston Court Main Stage, 70 N. Mentor Ave., Pasadena

When: 8 p.m. Thursdays through Saturdays, 2 and 7 p.m. Sundays

Ends: Aug. 8

Price: \$30

Contact: (626) 683-6883 or www.bostoncourt.org

Running time: 2 hours, 40 minutes

gious fundamentalism. Common characters link the three scenes, 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 interpenetration of form and theme.