

ORIENTALISM EXPLODED (shorter version)

PERA PALAS. Written by Sinan Unel. Directed by Michael Michetti. Co-produced by the Antaeus Company and The Theatre at Boston Court. Boston Court Theatre, Pasadena, CA. West Coast premiere. July 23-August 28, 2005.

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Beyond the lovers quarrels, family fights, near-farcial entrances, and (tasteful) bathroom jokes, Pera Palas is a play about self-identity. The play addresses what it means to be Turkish, or English, American, a father, a son, a sister, a wife, gay, modern, emancipated, traditional, secular, Islamic, addicted and even infertile. Given such an ambitious menu of identifiers, the wonder of it all is that Pera Palas doesn't disintegrate into a soapy cavalcade. Rather, this play wrestles intelligently with something that has plagued certain "developing" nations of the past century – Orientalism and its many hand-maidens.

Orientalism, in its most familiar form, is a habit of mind indulged by colonialists and imperialists that essentializes the other as exotic and unbridgeably alien. Think of how generalities about Iraq and its people or Islam in general are bandied about by self-appointed experts. These pronouncements are typically uttered with the same self-serving smugness with which some pontificate about, say, Merlot. Orientalism, however, becomes most problematic when the "other" – be they Turkish, Asian, Iraqi Arab, Latin, African – internalizes the dominating culture's tropes, deferring to the superiority of the imperial power's values, and suppressing or rejecting its own in the name of modernization or progress. This play dives uninhibitedly into that maelstrom, leaving its characters to thrash and flail to keep from drowning in cross-cultural confusion.

Set in Istanbul, Pera Palas (the name of a famous old international hotel) focuses on three defining moments of Turkish social, cultural, and political history: 1918-24 (the end of World War I to the birth of the Republic); 1952-53 (the height of American influence); and 1994 (when an Islamic revival challenged seventy years of secularism). Constantinople/Istanbul – its double name indicative of its bipolarity – is the East-West's border town. The Bosphorus has often been identified as the place where Asia and Europe collide. Each period treated in this play marks a major collision.

In the first, with the European powers carving up the former Ottoman Empire, the principal foreign players were French and British. It was a time when French became the preferred language of Istanbul's elite. Even as women's suffrage and emancipation was stirring in the West, young Turkish women were still being relegated to the harem. The primary relationship in this stratum of the play is that of Evelyn Crawley (Jeanie Hackett), a self-consciously progressive Englishwoman, and Melek (Rebecca Mozo/Tessa Thompson), her devoted young Turkish friend. The sociologically-inclined Miss Crawley is invited to observe first-hand the secret sisterhood of the harem. She struggles to suspend judgment on its mores, pushing herself to accept the customs of the household on its own terms. She ultimately fails. She rails against both the British ambassador and Melek's father (a Pasha and Turkish diplomat). The Pasha's earlier deference to Evelyn, as embodiment of all things modern and British (in stark contrast to his casual disrespect for his wives, daughter, and feminist son), makes him a poster-boy for the pitfalls of Orientalism. His suicide coincides with the fall of the Sultanate and the collapse of his world.

In the second period (the early 1950s), the post-war influence of the United States finds expression in the tale of two sisters from Ohio who teach at the American school in Istanbul. The younger sister (Angela Goethels/Tamara Krinsky) is hungry to break out of the cloistered life of the school. She falls in love with Orhan (Ramon de Ocampo), a handsome, charming young Turk, the only son of a well-off, well-connected Turkish family. His dark intensity coupled with her gleaming blond lightness, epitomizes a familiar Western fantasy/fear of miscegenation. Their naïve faith in love's power to conquer all slams up against the

prejudices of both Orhan's and Kathy's families. Separated by language, customs, tastes, and religion, problems in the marriage appear early when Orhan – in love with all things American – is summarily rejected by an American oil company for a job. He knows that he's been rejected because he's Turkish, and he learns that imperial America is not and never will be his friend. Internalizing his disillusionment, Orhan takes his frustration out on his wife and begins to self-medicate with booze, cigarettes, and solipsistic rants (habits that ferment for forty years).

The play's last period, 1994, finds Murat, the son of Orhan and Kathy, having just returned to Istanbul with Brian, his American lover of eight years – an echo of the Kathy-Orhan “mixed marriage.” Murat avoids contact with his family, but Brian, taking matters into his own hands, contacts Murat's sister, Sema, a full-bore modern woman, a tough no-nonsense attorney, with secrets of her own (she's addicted to some Turkish valium-substitute, and she's been involved with a married man for ten years). Brian is both intoxicated with the exoticism of this place, yet afraid to fully experience it; his first brush with the local cuisine (roasted lamb intestines) is the source of the play's litany of bathroom jokes. Brian is, in some ways, the consummate vacationer, eager to sample the exotic yet unwilling to give up his homeland's habits (and prejudices).

All three time-periods co-exist on stage with scenes from each period playing simultaneously, intercutting and literally crossing through each other. Ten actors play twenty-seven roles. Three of these “doublings” offer such resonance that, had they been separately cast, powerful parallels and contrasts would have been lost. Other “doublings,” however, feel as if they are simply a way of reducing the cast size.

As Evelyn Crawley and Sema Bayraktar, Jeannie Hackett gives a tour de force portrait of two women separated by nearly a century. (One can only imagine the backstage frenzy of her many quick coif and costume changes.) Each in her own way is independent, strong-willed, sharply opinionated, yet still struggling against expectations of gender. Crawley tiptoes at the edge of “going native.” Sema has stepped into the neverland between two cultures, wearing her western manner like a well-fitted mask. Each blasts away at the hypocrisies of her native culture. Ms. Hackett manages to reveal both the similarities and differences between Crawley and Sema, allowing us to see and feel the unrelenting pressures of being an independent woman confronting vested patriarchies while experimenting with the freedom of adopting a multi-cultural identity.

As Cavid, the neglected and scorned son of the Pasha's first, and subsequently neglected wife, Bill Brochtrup captures the pathos of a lost soul, damaged by the harem system, who finds his voice as a feminist firebrand even while holding these submissive veiled women in contempt. Like early 20th century Turkey itself, Cavid is lost in the limbo between an idealized (and highly selective) Western (i.e. modern) paradise and the inescapable residue of his own history. While Mr. Brochtrup's Brian is marred by too overt (in my opinion) gay mannerisms, they do get laughs, but often at the expense of subtlety. Nevertheless, Mr. Brochtrup manages to suggest that, under different circumstances, Cavid and Brian could be very much the same, each superficially eager to sample the cultural values of “the other,” yet unwilling to fully embrace or understand them.

The doubling of Ali Reza (the Pasha, Melek and Cavid's father, a diplomat representing the last Sultan) and Joe Brown (Kathy Miller Bayraktar's bluntly parochial brother-in-law, an American oil exec) suggests just how similar these two roles are in their respective worlds. These are the kind of men who do the bidding of their political masters, who unthinkingly repeat the nostrums of their own respective cultures. Mikael Salazar sharply distinguishes the two roles through sheer physicality.

The doubling of Apollo Dukakis as an odalisque of the harem (1918) and as Orhan's mother (1952), however, pushes the envelope of high camp, making what should be an emotionally important scene into a drag sketch. Likewise, the use of certain women as men draws too much attention to the choice, seriously

distracting us from the content of the scenes.

In sharp contrast to his “drag” scenes, Mr. Dukakis’s portrait of the Older (1994) Orhan is so rich, nuanced, and by turns poignant and bombastic that it stands out in this universally superb cast. He manages to reveal volumes in simple actions, the small specificities that evoke an entire life, a world in a gesture. The masterful writing, acting, and staging of this climactic scene in which the prodigal son returns, create a kind of perfect storm of every contradiction in the eighty years of Turkish cultural history.

The set by Tom Buderwitz is a brilliant work of constructivist art, a Rauschenberg-like construction some thirty feet high and ninety wide, is a totemic grab bag of Turkey in the Twentieth Century. Sadly, it’s less successful as a playing area.

Director Michael Michetti does a masterful job of choreography. The scenes that need to tear at us, do; those that need to make us laugh, also do. His staging, however, is somewhat limited by restricting portions of the set to specific locations. It’s as if the entire stage has been turned into a soundstage, with different sections camera-blocked to hide adjacent sets. With lighting often generalized this sometimes leaves the actors floating in some vaguely “exotic” space, their little playing areas dwarfed by the constructivist collage. There’s a suspicion that this show was overproduced. Some roughness might have (counter-intuitively) enhanced the experience.

This is a play that works on its audience through juxtapositions (both ironic and evocative), and parallelisms that remind us that questions of self-identity in a shifting world are and will always be with us. That its characters wrestle with what they love and what they hate about the West and about themselves is what gives this work a satisfying depth and breadth. One could easily transpose this saga to China in the 20th century (another culture caught in the cross-currents of modernization as it confronted the seeming triumphs of the West). Just as Turkey was once characterized as the “sick man” of Europe, China was seen – often most decisively by its own reformers – as the “sick man” of Asia. Both had, and continue to have, a love-hate relationship with the West, confused not only by what is meant by “the West” but what is meant by “the East.”

Pera Palas offers insight into the dangers of ethnic stereotyping and the pathologies of Orientalism. It forces us to examine the uncritical acceptance of generalities that provide the foundations on which imperial adventures are mounted and on which occupying armies depend, the kind of national prejudices that smother international consciousness. While Pera Palas may on the surface appear as a period play and sometimes soapy family saga, it is the kind of relevant, challenging work of theatre that, given its onerous production demands, is rarely seen. More the pity.

Richard Adams
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