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‘Pera Palas’ juggles well

By Frances Baum Nicholson
correspondent

Turkey, by sheer dint of location has always seemed to clash with itself. Placed on the very boundary between Europe and Asia, invaded over the centuries by civilizations from either side, Turkey’s culture has seemed the consummate image of Eastern mystery, yet operated in intimate contact with the West. In this past century, after massacre and war, all its tradition upturned overnight. The results have offered both promise and frustration.

The last provides the central images of Sinan Unel’s compelling “Pera Palas,” now at the Theatre @ Boston Court in Pasadena. The play, which interweaves stories from three distinct periods of the 20th century, works to show the difficult, and always righteous nature of change. It becomes the tale of a country, but also of individual human nature and the better angels for which we all reach.

The three pieces interweave, appearing in quick succession – sometimes simultaneously – in and around the westernized Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul. Ten actors create all the many characters, leaping from time period to time period with deceptive ease. To tie the parts together, two characters, from each time period make their way – older and played by someone else – to the next.

The stories prove consistently compelling. First, just after World War I, an Englishwoman encounters the insular life of the harem, even as she embraces those forcible modernizations will do away with the harem world. Second, in the giddy post-war ‘50s, an American schoolteacher falls for a young Turkish man whose hopes hang on a U.S.-Turkish friendship that may not reach as far as equality in romance or the job market. Finally, in the early ‘90s, a young Turkish photographer returns from the U.S. to try to make peace with his family, and the city of his birth.

The cast are all members of the highly respected Antaeus Company, and on any given night you may see any combination of the 20 actors who have been double-cast in the ten roles. Opening night saw standout performances by everyone, but most particularly Bill Brochtrup in the dual roles of a pasha’s son and a modern American, Daniel Bess as the modern Turk out to recover his roots, Rebecca Mozo as a young girl very committed to harem life, Jeannie Hackett is the interfering Englishwoman, and Apollo Dukakis playing both a former idealist whose life has betrayed him, and that character’s own mother.

Director Michael Michetti becomes a master weaver, putting characters from different time periods in the same room at the same time, and making it seem completely natural. Thanks to Tom Buderwitz’s many-tiered set, action takes place literally all over the Boston Court space, allowing for quick changes, shifts in the time period and mood, and all the audience misdirection necessary to make a play this complex come to life. Cheers also go to costume designer Ivy Y Chou for making each period obvious, but not obtrusively so.

The well-disciplined actors make the whole thing hum like a top, leaving one to absorb content. The whole theme – that change is not easy to control, that that what one dreams of becoming is not always what one

theme, that change is not easy to control, that that what one dreams of becoming is not always what one ends up with, can resonate with people far from Turkey and its comparatively isolated history. As such, Unel's play reaches far beyond the confines of one anglicized Istanbul hotel, or those who would understand its setting before the play begins.

"Pera Palas" has moments of mild confusion, such as when characters from two different time periods say things one would really want to absorb at the same time. Still, the play and its topics are fresh and engaging. Indeed, the Turkish ambassador considers the play a great way to reach out and explain who Turks are, beyond stereotype. One certainly leaves with much to ponder and discuss.

Frances Baum Nicholson is a freelance writer based in Altadena. Write her in care of the San Gabriel Valley News Group.