

Pera Palas

I wonder what Sinan Unel's Pera Palas would look like if it was played in chronological order. The play's three acts cover three distinct stories in three distinct time periods, yet the stories are not assigned individual acts. Instead, scenes from each of the three stories are alternated throughout the evening, and the three tales unfold more or less simultaneously. Moreover, nearly all of the actors in the play perform multiple roles. An actor with a "leading role" in one story may find himself playing a supporting part in another tale. (This West Coast premiere production, at the Theatre at Boston Court, is double cast. No matter what else is said, getting two casts of ten actors to play more than twenty roles in three different time periods is an impressive accomplishment.)

The three stories all begin in the same place - a room in the Pera Palas Hotel in Istanbul. And, although it is not made clear until the second act (but the program gives it away before the play even starts), the characters in the three stories are not wholly unrelated.

The first story begins in 1918 and centers on Evelyn, a British journalist who has come to Turkey planning to document her travels, and her friend Melek, a fifteen-year-old Turkish girl who is the daughter of a wealthy Pasha. Although Evelyn is one of those gung-ho English women who wants to experience different cultures, she also cannot quite keep in check her distaste for the lack of rights Turkish women have. Melek lives her days in the harem, and desires nothing more than to marry (in an arranged marriage) and have children. Indeed, the most rebellious thing Melek can conceive of is sneaking out to take a peek at her future husband before they are married.

The second tale begins in 1952, long after the gender equality Evelyn hoped for in Turkey has become a reality. This story centers on Kathy, a young American teacher who falls in love with Orhan, a young Turkish man. Their story focuses on their respective families' reactions to their somewhat whirlwind courtship. Kathy's sister tells her to stay away from the "handsome no-good foreigner," although, in Istanbul, it is Kathy who is the foreigner.

The final story takes place in 1994. Murat has brought his American lover, Brian, back to Istanbul to meet his parents. But Murat has been estranged from his family for years, and he doesn't even have the courage to pick up the phone and tell them he has flown halfway around the world to see them.

Just setting forth the skeletal outlines of the three plots, it is easy to see certain plot threads and commonalities. Each story, for instance, addresses the idea of broadening the scope of what was then an acceptable marriage in Turkey. But, more than that, each story considers the evolving roles of women in Turkish society, as well as the evolving relationship between Turks and Westerners. And, because some of the characters are the same from one story to the next, we can see how certain decisions play out in a very personal way. To take just one example, Orhan's parents are not simply some random Turkish couple; his mother was a slave in the harem we saw in Melek's story. It is easier to understand her reluctance to accept Kathy as a daughter-in-law when we know where she's coming from.

And yet, much of this understanding is lost because we don't really know that harem slave's story until the end of the third act - after we've already seen her older self disapprove of Kathy. Pera Palas tells all three of its stories roughly simultaneously - which means that the first act sets them all up, the second act moves them all along, and the third act resolves them in a great big flurry of activity. It's almost information overload, as you try to process a key plot development in one story and work out how this might explain something you've seen much earlier in a subsequent story. What's worse is that, for the very first time in the show, the third act contains overlapping dialogue - climactic scenes in two stories unfold at once, and, rather than give you the opportunity to digest what appear to be some very important concepts, the play is

off and running in another direction completely as another story takes hold. But these scenes are supposed to be the payoff - they're what you've been sitting here for two and a half hours to get to - and they're given short shrift by having only half the spotlight each.

Paradoxically, the play could probably use a little more overlapping dialogue in earlier scenes. While Pera Palas goes to all the trouble of alternating between its three storylines, and risks the possible audience confusion that goes with it, the play doesn't take full advantage of the opportunities such braided storylines allow. Occasionally, people from one storyline will stay onstage (sleeping, for example) while people from another storyline will inhabit the same space, oblivious to the people occupying it at a different time. But there are no obvious connections made - we don't see two people in different time periods sharing the same thought, or even opposite ones. Only briefly do we see the same character share the stage with his older or younger self - yet since the characters are played by different actors at different ages, there is no reason why someone's future counterpart couldn't be there, even just to watch and reflect on his past.

The acting is absolutely first rate, with particularly notable performances turned in by Gigi Bermingham as the British adventurer Evelyn, who wants to respect Turkish culture but can't help wanting to fix it just a touch; Daniel Blinkoff as Melek's half brother, who is rather more in favor of women's rights than Melek is, and gives a powerful yet conflicted speech to a group of Turkish women; and Harry Groener, who provides comic relief in some female roles, but then sinks his teeth into some of the best material in the play as Murat's father. Ivy Y. Chou's costumes are exemplary, particularly the opulent harem dresses in the 1918 story (although someone should make certain that, when Melek prostrates herself facing upstage, the audience doesn't see the great big "39" written on the soles of her shoes). Tom Buderwitz's spacious set amply covers all the necessary locales, while its upper level consists of the rough outlines of a cityscape, which is then lit exquisitely by Adam H. Greene. Indeed, once or twice, I found the breathtaking transitions of dawn or sunset to upstage the action taking place beneath them.

Pera Palas is a big, beautiful, logistical nightmare of a show, in which epic storytelling techniques ultimately do not manage to put across an epic story.

Pera Palas continues at the Theatre at Boston Court through August 28, 2005. For tickets, see www.bostoncourt.com. For schedule of performers, see www.antaeus.org.

The Theatre at Boston Court - Artistic Directors Jessica Kubzansky & Michael Michetti; Executive Director Eileen T'Kaye; Producing Director Michael Seel; Managing Director Cheryl Rizzo; Founding Director Z. Clark Branson - and The Antaeus Company - Artistic Directors John Apicella & Jeanie Hackett; Managing Director Holly Harter; Founding Artistic Director Dakin Matthews -- present Pera Palas. Written by Sinan Unel; Directed by Michael Michetti. Ensemble: Gigi Bermingham, Daniel Bess, Daniel Blinkoff, Bill Brochtrup, Ramon De Ocampo, Seamus Dever, Dawn Didawick, Apollo Dukakis, Angela Goethals, Harry Groener, Jeanie Hackett, Tamara Krinsky, Rebecca Mozo, Melinda Peterson, John Prosky, Deborah Puette, Mikael Salazar, Tessa Thompson, Libby West, and Ogie Zulueta. Scenic Design Tom Buderwitz; Lighting Design Adam H. Greene; Costume Design Ivy Y. Chou; Sound Design Leon Rothenberg; Properties Design Chuck Olsen; Assistant Director Suzanne Karpinski; Dialect Coach Sarah Hartmann; Production Stage Manager Young Ji; Publicist Aldrich & Associates and Betty PR.

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