

Pera Palas - A Pearl in Theater's Crown

A glorious theater experience that will leave you wanting more.

By Leyla Gulen

Staff Writer

Through the doors of an Istanbul hotel lie the intersection of time and fate. So seamless is this interaction in the West Coast premier of Sinan Unel's "Pera Palas."

Set at the famed 114 year old metropolitan hotel, a crossroads unto itself, Unel masterfully weaves a web of three separate story lines set in three different time periods, 1918 to 1924, 1952 to 1953 and 1994.

All 10 actors playing 27 characters, with their unique connection to the hotel and not wholly disconnected from each other, brilliantly brought to life what is joyfully complex and utterly logical all at the same time.

It's as if Unel took hold of the sky, earth and sea and braided them together into one singular being while delicately maintaining each strand as independent.

The most independent tress, on many levels, begins in 1918 and centers around a British journalist (Gigi Bermingham) who has come to Turkey to document her travels. She meets a young Turkish girl (Rebecca Mozo), the daughter of a wealthy Pasha, who invites her to stay at the Pasha's harem.

The no-nonsense journalist, while impressed with a life of little ambition and nothing more to worry about than a stroll through private gardens, is gobbsmacked by the bliss of ignorance and the inequality of the female race in Turkey.

Both Bermingham and Mozo make such a convincing pair that one can only feel disappointment at the heartache resulting from the strained relationship that awaits them in the future.

Mozo plays a splendid Turkish girl with boundless energy and a well-attempted accent, not to mention quite authentic in her Turkish utterances except for one huge discrepancy when she called her father 'papa' and not 'baba.'

Mozo exudes the subservient nature of a girl devoted to Turkish tradition and societal norm without waiver. Bermingham, embodies a self-secure British woman caught in the midst of using her own freedom while impressing upon her fellow female to shed the scarf and be seen by the world.

The same theme of independence plays out in 1994 in the lives of two male lovers, one American (Daniel Blinkoff) and one Turkish (Daniel Bess), who find themselves unable to announce their union to blood ties in a country, in so many ways, steeped in tradition yet shrouded by the guise of modernity. As Bess's character says with spite and bitterness, "All that glitters in Turkey is gold." While hiding out at the Pera Palas, more is revealed than expected.

Blinkoff, with his flaming antics, added just the right splash of humor to tastefully juxtapose what is, at times, a somber play. And, Bess personified a Turkish man faced with the struggle of identity.

Simultaneously, as these storylines brew, Unel stirs in 1952 with the tale of two American sisters studying abroad in Istanbul. One sister (Angela Goethals) more touched by the country and its countrymen than the other.

Goethals, who has a long list of professional credits that include “Spanglish,” “Jerry Maguire” and the hit television series “24,” also plays a harem servant and offers such charm and professional exactitude that it made the play all the more enjoyable to watch.

Performed in the intimate Theatre at Boston Court, the distance, or lack-there-of, between the audience and the cast makes the play feel interactive. And, while the stories play among themselves, often times in the same room, one never gets confused as to where one tale begins and the other ends. This is also giving credit to stage and lighting design, which was void of barriers, but so clearly separated each scene.

It does what theater should do by thrusting the audience into living through the characters vicariously and this can only be accomplished by a stellar cast.

Director Michael Michetti is cut out for his work. Never did the play falter, slow down or look unpolished and the attention paid on the intricacies of Turkish culture and mannerisms was thoroughly evident.

Michetti, who is self-proclaimed as anything by an expert on Turkey or Turks, clearly did his homework and as a result delivered an A-plus show.

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