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'American Tales' at Deaf West Theatre

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Carlos Chavez / Los Angeles Times

Characters Alonzo Fitz on the phone with Rosannah Ethelton during the Mark Twain play, 'The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence & Rosannah Ethelton.'

Inspired by Mark Twain and Herman Melville, "American Tales" reveals the authors' uncelebrated gifts for reading the tea leaves of American culture.

By Amy Nicholson
June 26, 2008

MARK TWAIN and Herman Melville are renowned for capturing the salt, wit and dreams of their eras. But the two musicals they've inspired for the world premiere of "American Tales" -- presented by the Antaeus company -- reveal the authors' uncelebrated gifts for reading the tea leaves of American culture.

In Twain's little-known and lightly science-fictional short story "The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton," a suitor is enraged by a newfangled device -- the telephone -- that enables his amour to spurn him for a fiancé she's never seen. And Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" follows the co-workers of a passive office clerk who refuses to do his job, and later even to move or eat.

Together, the works presage a nation of detached souls who, as composer [Jan Powell](#) describes, "know the deepest, darkest secrets of people they meet online, but nothing

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about the people they share space with every day."

"American Tales" started in 2005 when Powell and lyricist Ken Stone's libretto inspired by Bartleby sold out every staged reading and went on to win Stone a [Kleban Award](#) for most promising librettist. It took a year to find the right piece to match it with for a full production, but when Powell and Stone got a tip from a friend to unearth Twain's overlooked yarn, they realized they had an apt pairing.

"American Tales" is about "connection and disconnection," says Powell. Adds Stone, "They share an idea of depersonalization, the ability to both connect and drop out."

Stone describes the works as "so oddly contemporary," adding, "Yes, that's the world we live in, but how did [Melville and Twain] know?"

Twain's phone-line-cross'd lovers find that the technology that gives them long-distance intimacy can't guarantee privacy -- they may be the first citizens to have their lives scrambled by wiretapping done by a romantic rival as invasive as John Ashcroft.

This thread of caution shoots through Antaeus' adaptation, which director Kay Cole inflates into an exaggerated comedy. Powell's score draws on the musical themes of early American melodrama giving it what he calls "a late-1800s small opera house feel."

The music and mood darken after intermission when a lawyer discovers that his new hire Bartleby is conducting a polite protest of the world, headquartered in the lawyer's office, where the clerk's response to any task is "I would prefer not to."

Seen as a portent against everything from capitalism to city living, the mystery of Melville's contentious fable is why does Bartleby disengage, but, as Stone observes, the story's heft is in everyone else's reactions -- from his co-workers' anger and resentment to the lawyer's permissive fascination.

"We're content to leave Bartleby an enigma and see his effect on those around him, whom, by passing through their lives, he has transformed," elaborates Stone.

The mystery for the production is how to write a musical for a character who refuses to perform -- a challenge Powell and Stone tackle by isolating the scrivener musically from the rest of the ensemble.

"Even as he withdraws, his presence looms heavier and heavier over the lawyer's soul," says Powell, who thickens his score with classical tones that deepen until an epilogue that allows Bartleby and the lawyer a warm duet. Their final connection, and that of Twain's lovebirds, parallels our new insight into these timeless authors who, in writing of their own time, also wrote about ours.

"We aren't as unique as we thought," says Stone.

'AMERICAN TALES'

WHERE: Deaf West Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood

WHEN: Opens 8 p.m. Fri.; runs 8 p.m. Fri.-Sat., 3 and 7:30 p.m. Sun.; closes Aug. 17.

PRICE: \$25

INFO: (866) 811-4111, theatermania.com, www.antaeus.org



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