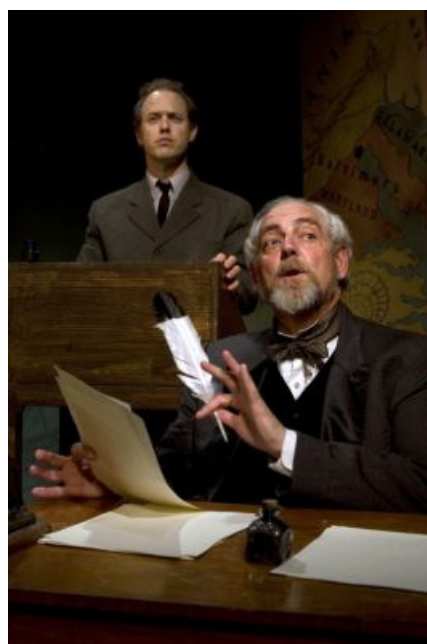


American Tales

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The Anateus Company opens its 2008 ClassicsFest series (of 8 works in progress and 6 "first looks") with a world premiere fully staged production of a pair of absolutely charming one-act chamber musicals, billed together as American Tales.

American Tales is comprised of Mark Twain's "The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton" and Herman Melville's "Bartleby The Scrivener," both featuring music by Jan Powell, book and lyrics by Ken Stone, and direction by Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber.

Twain's tale is being touted as the first story of two people falling in love with the aid of technology, in this case the still infant telephone.

When a misdialed number puts Alonzo (Daniel Blinkoff) in contact, not with his Aunt Susan, but with an angelic-voiced stranger named Rosanna (Devon Sorvari), it is love at first hearing for both him and the party at the other end of the line as they join voices in "Rosannah's Song," their phones held close to their hearts. Unfortunately, Alonzo and Rosannah live on opposite sides of 1890s America, he in Eastport, Maine and she in San Francisco.

Not only distance gets in the way of true love but also the appearance of the dastardly fortune hunter Burley (Raphael Sbarge). Despite the bouquet of flowers he brings to Rosannah, we know Burley to be a villain from the first notes of "dum dum dum dum DUM ... dum-dum-dum-dum." Though Rosannah rejects him repeatedly, Burley is a man who will not take no for an answer:

Rosannah: When I am in need of more plainness, I will call you.

Burley: She loves me!!!

Still, it is Alonzo who has captured Rosannah's heart, even though his medium stature does not match the 6'2" (at the very least) that she imagines him to be, just as Alonzo has fallen head over heels for Rosannah, despite her blond locks' not matching the picture of ebony curls he sees in his mind's eye.

When Burley learns of his long distance competition, he has no choice but to journey to Maine, disguised as a French inventor, in order to throw a wrench in Rosannah and Alonzo's budding relationship and then ...

Act 2 is the darker (yet still frequently comic) tale of the scrivener who would prefer not to scriven? Scrive? Scriv?

Set in the pre-Xerox 1890s New York, "Bartleby the Scrivener" (Sbarge) is the newest law firm employee hired to copy documents at 4 cents per 100 words, joining fellow scriveners Turkey (John Combs) and Nippers (Blinkoff) and young messenger Ginger Nut (Sorvari). (Only Bartleby escapes being cleverly nicknamed.)

At first, his lawyer employer (Peter Van Norden) tells us that Bartleby was "like a writing engine" subsisting (coincidentally or not) on ginger nuts. Then one day, "the earth stopped turning." When asked to copy some document or other, Bartleby replies with a simple, "I would prefer not to."

"The man is doomed," proclaims Turkey. "Blood will flow today," adds Nippers. But in fact, Bartleby retains his job, even after repeated (albeit polite) refusals to do the jobs he's assigned.

Bartleby's lawyer boss begins to dread and detest the verb "prefer," which he begins to notice everywhere he goes. Even when fired, Bartleby replies, "I would prefer not to quit you."

Who exactly is Bartleby and what mystery surrounds him? Why does he pass hours in reverie looking through the window at a "wall of brick gone black with time, a dead unyielding wall?" And what shocking discovery does the lawyer make about Bartleby's abode? These, and other questions, may (or may not) be answered in this blackly comic musical adaptation of Melville's 19th century American tale.

Composer Powell has written a bunch of highly melodic tunes for both pieces, the catchiest of which is probably the oft-reprised waltz "Rosannah's Song." Stone's book and lyrics are clever (as when rhyming "schemer" and "femur") and sweetly funny ("That is not Aunt Susan. That is some angel! Now my heart is in bright and sunny California!"). Cole and Steingraber direct with delicacy and imagination, as in Alonzo's circuitous journey to California. Steven Ladd Jones and Billy Thompson provide first-class musical direction, with Jones on piano (alternating with Michael Alfera), Amanda Kopcsak on violin, and Jay Rubbottom on bass.

The performances, though perhaps not vocally quite at the level one is accustomed to hearing in CLO lead performances, are in every other respect impeccable. Blinkoff's charming naivete as Alonzo is an absolute delight to watch, and his Act 2 transformation into a nondescript scrivener impressive. Sorvari is the picture of loveliness as Rosannah, and does a delightfully boyish turnabout as Ginger Nut. The other three actors (whose roles are double cast) do equally fine work. Sbarge is absolutely hilarious as the comically villainous (and very full of himself) Burley, and the contrast with the relentlessly gloomy Bartleby is impressive. Van Norden makes a powerful impression as Act 2's lawyer, and essays a variety of roles in Act 1. Combs plays a drolly masculine maid as well as Uncle Charles in the Twain tale and does fine work as Turkey in Melville's.

Laura Fine Hawkes' imaginative scenic design places both plays amidst large asymmetrical panels imprinted with pieces of late 19th century American maps (Oklahoma is still called "Indian Territory"). A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes beautifully capture the look and feel of another century. Jose Lopez's lighting and John Apicella's lighting design are equally effective, as are Devin Gregory's props (including 1890s telephones and quill pens).

Kicking off an exciting SummerFest 2008 (which also features "works in progress" by Tennessee Williams, Euripides, Lillian Hellmann, and others, and "first looks" at possible future productions of plays by authors as diverse as Moss Hart and William Shakespeare), American Tales ably demonstrates the versatility of The Antaeus Company, and provides one of the most charming evenings of musical theater you're likely to find this year.

DeafWest Theatre, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Through August 17. Fridays and Saturdays at 8:00 and Sundays at 3:00 and 7:30. Tickets: 866-811-4111 or www.Antaeus.org.

--Steven Stanley
June 27, 2008

Photos: Michele K. Short