



Mysterious 'Pericles' transcends uneven text.

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Did Shakespeare write the entire play "Pericles" or just the much better last three acts? Should the play be staged as a morality-play variation on the story of Job or a flamboyant fairytale excursion from despair to hope? No matter how scholars and theater-goers divide on the uncertainties about this uneven romance, director Andrei Serban has turned the current American Repertory Theatre revival of this mysterious work into a visual romp that almost always compensates for the play's shortcomings.

"Pericles" focuses on the ups and downs and physical wanderings of the title prince of Tyre-no, not the famous fifth-century B.C.E. Greek leader. Set on various coastal lands of the Aegean and eastern Mediterranean seas, this rambling odyssey calls on its undaunted hero, at times even recalling Jonah, to solve a strange riddle involving incest; to lose his wife, Thais, to death at sea; and lose his daughter Marina to the evil Dionyza, wife of Tarsus governor Cleon; and later still to kidnap pirates. Struggling Job-like against despair and disbelief, Pericles ultimately regains now-revived Thais and redeemed Marina.

Director Serban transcends the ups and downs in the text by establishing a consistently inventive and plot-clarifying approach that makes the most of the parallels between the title hero and other fathers in the play as well as between Thais and Dionyza. Aside from a largely strong cast, much credit goes to Gabriel Berry for whimsical and lively costumes -- especially hats adorned with sea creatures like dolphins. Dan Nutu deserves accolades for his striking set and video design, particularly powerful shots of Thomas Derrah, who is memorably disturbing as incestuous King Antiochus (no, not the Chanukah one) and his daughter. Beverly Emmons catches the fairy-tale wonder of the play in her lighting.

Robert Sella captures Pericles' valor and forbearance, but Mia Yoo proves the true standout as the vulnerable though later validated Thais, daughter of King Simonides of Pentapolis -- the latter another rich characterization by the gifted Derrah. Will Lebow's Cleon may seem over the top as a buffoon, but Karen MacDonald is properly malevolent as Dionyza. Oliver Henzler has the right moral ambiguity as Mytilene governor Lysimachus, who reclaims his virtue and marries Marina.

Serban may not finally move audiences in this high-energy staging, but A.R.T.'s princely "Pericles" does much to illuminate the play's darker mysteries.

Very different mysteries and challenges confront the characters in the other offering in repertory at A.R.T., "The Sound of a Voice," Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang's two-play new work with music by Philip Glass.

Both the first play, with the same name as the title, and "Hotel of Dreams," the second, focus on the identity of Japanese women thought to be more than they seem. In the first, Hanako is believed to be a witch and studied with great intensity by a samurai known as Man. In the second, an older woman, ostensibly a madam for courtesans, may bear deep love for a visitor named Kenji Yamamoto.

Under Robert Woodruff's painstaking and remarkable direction, Hwang's Zen-influenced views on society, love, life and mortality achieve a measure of visual warmth -- in part thanks to Robert Israel's elegantly spare scenic design.

What finally defeats the real virtues of this earnest experiment is Philip Glass' regrettably monochrome music. Suzan Hanson's Woman, Herbert Perry's Man, Janice Felty's older Woman and Eugene Parry's Yamamoto are all well sung, but Glass's repetitive compositions weaken Hwang's sometimes-involving text as profoundly as his earlier work did for Hwang's 1989 A.R.T. disappointment "1000 Airplanes on the Roof."

Egg magician Donato Colucci, also known as the 1971 founder of Boston's Publick Theatre, first performed his fascinating black comedy "The Great Gorgonzola and His Assistant" at his 10-seat home theater in Allston. Now, at the much larger Summer Street Actor's Workshop, "Gorgonzola" not only boasts a better stage for Colucci's opera-laced portrait of a New York veteran magician's last stand, but also features the expressive and often virtuosic work of 23-year-old Jewish actor David Skeist, now playing the assistant.

Skeist, a recent Harvard graduate whose credits range from Mozart in "Amadeus" to Teyva in "Fiddler on the Roof," captures his character's blend of vulnerability and grandstanding charm with a level of performance beyond his predecessor.

Colucci does well with Gorgonzola's movement from reality to memories of a dark past. There is much enchantment in "Gorgonzola" and Colucci's own "The Encyclopedia of Egg Magic," available at the theater.

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