

DC THEATRE SCENE

Peace

Reviewed by Tim Treanor

September 4th, 2008

Peace

By Callie Kimball

Produced by Washington Shakespeare Company

Directed by Alexander Strain

This, *this* is why Washington theaters need to produce Washington playwrights - because Washington playwrights understand what Washington audiences want to see from their theaters. We don't want plays about politics. We work in politics all day, and many of us for several hours afterward. We want to see plays about the things which make politics important in the first place: the quest for peace, the struggle for liberty, the hope that we can bring joy to life.



John Geoffrion and Simone Zvi (Photo: Ray Gniwek)

Callie Kimball understands this, and at the Washington Shakespeare Company she is delivering in spades. *Peace*, which is set within the framework of Aristophanes' play of the same name, is a complex meditation on peace and its consequences which manages to avoid pomposity and self-importance. Indeed, it is extraordinarily bold in its self-deflating way, punctuating shibboleths and stepping contemptuously on political correctness. It is witty, affecting, absorbing and, to boot, most excellently performed.

It is full of eccentric off-center notes which made its opening-night audience laugh with delight, from the moment a chorus member's (Joe Brack) giggling breaks up a windy prologue (delivered by Brian Crane) about ostriches, and including Hermes' (Sara Barker) explanation of how she knows the ins-and-outs of a prison in which War (Crane) has kept Peace (Anastasia Wilson): "I issued the RFP and evaluated the proposals." (and how Washington is that!). But the final scene, and in particular the closing line, is composed and delivered with such heartbreaking pathos that it is impossible not to acknowledge that peace, like war, has its consequences.

Readers of the Aristophanes play can guess what happens, more or less: Graleo (John Geoffrion) undertakes a perilous trip in a manure-powered hot-air balloon from his Tennessee farm to Mount Olympus, in a desperate attempt to convince Peace to return to earth. It seems that Graleo and his wife, Gralea (Barker), have lost their son to war and although they know they can't bring him back, they hope to remedy the bleak prospects which the endless war has produced. Once Graleo is in Olympus, Hermes (Barker) conscripts him to help in a training exercise for Havoc (Brack), War's protégé. But when Graleo attempts to broach the business of his business, War responds with a propaganda blast which, like all propaganda, contains elements of truth: "Man's

natural state is one of conflict,” he says. “If they can’t fight the system, they’ll fight each other. Let a little steam off.” But gods, like men, cannot live on philosophy alone, and after War and his minions take off for a strip club, Graleo manages to induce Hermes to help him liberate Peace and her two daughters, the gluttonous Harvest (Simone Zvi) and the hard-partying Festival (Gwen Grastorf). Once liberated, Peace agrees to come to earth - but at a price which breaks Graleo’s heart.

In her program notes, Kimball says that peace “is never defined in the play...Is peace simply the absence of war? Is it its own suppression of sorts, exacting a price so that it might thrive?” Peace meets the answer to that question head-on: to live in peace with our neighbors, we must give up some of our dreams. To talk about the fight for peace seems as oxymoronic as to talk about the struggle for sleep, but the language is correct: to live in peace we must win a battle with ourselves. This is precisely the sort of complex, nuanced message which resonates with Washington audiences, many of whom are engaged professionally in questions of war, peace, and peaceful domestic life. It has taken a Washington playwright, channeling a 2500-year-old Greek, to bring it to us.

That Kimball so faithfully works within Aristophanes’ frame may at first make the play seem archaic and inaccessible, but she fills that frame with such wit and modern language that the play swims along like a salmon on the Cohoes. She has her theology-debating (if there were only two of each animal on the ark, what did they eat? And how did they cook it?) rustics (Matt “Slice” Hicks and Brandon McCoy). At first they seem like stock characters - boonie Christians - but Kimball eventually gives them each a quiet dignity and a sly strength, and in the end we’re cheering for them. Hermes, messenger to the gods, recites her many responsibilities - in charge of weights and measures, looks over athletes, and so on - like a GS-11 reciting her overstuffed position description. The first Act seems a little diffuse, but the climax is sad and ridiculous, and it draws all the elements together.

There are some particular acts of excellence. Brack is hilarious as Havoc, and then later as a spectacularly sleazy DJ. Grastorf and Zvi squeeze every ounce out of their very funny roles as Peace’s goofy daughters. Wilson, who does not have much to do as Peace, is good as Graleo’s acid-tongued neighbor. Geoffrion gives a restrained, natural and very sympathetic performance which reminded me of John Lithgow (who Geoffrion resembles slightly) at his best. Tobias Harding’s set features painted panels which, when moved strategically, turn the outdoors to indoors, and Tennessee to Olympus. It was well conceived and beautifully executed. Finally, Sara Barker’s two spot-on performances - as Hermes and as Graleo’s flawed, wounded wife - are vital to the play’s success. I have seen Barker perform four roles in three plays during the past ten months, and in each instance she has found her character’s center and showed it to us with sizzling intensity. Barker may be becoming one of those rare actors whose presence in a show is in and of itself sufficient to justify the price of a ticket.

So: attention, Washington audiences. To go to theatre which speaks to your experience, watch a play written by a Washington playwright. In particular, see a play written by the gifted and woefully underproduced Kimball. In more particular, go see this play, whose wonderfully exuberant production shows that the Washington Shakespeare Company, like Kimball, and like all of us, gets it.

Running Time: 2 hours, including one intermission.

Where: Washington Shakespeare Company's Clark Street Playhouse, 601 South Clark Street, Arlington (Crystal City) VA.

When: Thursdays through Sundays until September 28. Thursdays through Saturdays are at 8; Saturday and Sunday matinees at 2.

Tickets: Thursdays \$25, Fridays and Sundays \$30, Saturday evenings \$35, Saturday matinees PWYC. If you have a Fringe button, you can get 2-for-1 tickets. Call 1-800.494 TIXS or go here.

More Information: visit the website.

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