

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Dot and Pericles: Major Directors, Minor Shows

David Sheward · Wednesday, March 2nd, 2016

Between them, Susan Stroman and Trevor Nunn have collected ten Tony Awards and are two of the hottest directors on Broadway and the West End, with such smash hits as *The Producers*, *Contact*, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and *Cats* on their respective resumes. These superstar staggers are currently represented by less-than-stellar Off-Broadway productions of lesser works. Stroman is taking on a rare non-musical venture, actor-playwright Coleman Domingo's family dramedy *Dot* at the Vineyard Theatre, while Nunn tackles Shakespeare's muddled and infrequently performed *Pericles* for Theatre for a New Audience. Both shows have their moments of flash and invention, but are ultimately disappointing.



Marjorie Johnson, Colin Hanlon, Libya V. Pugh, and Sharon Washington in *Dot*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

Dot is part of Coleman's semi-autobiographical trilogy of plays—the others are *A Boy and His Soul* and *Wild With Happy*—depicting the same West Philadelphia neighborhood. The play follows the familiar pattern of a dysfunctional family gathering during the holidays and serving long suppressed resentments and secrets along with the turkey and stuffing. *Dot* has the misfortune to open close to the Broadway transfer of Stephen Karam's *The Humans* which handles the same basic template with no clichés. Coleman employs the standard-issue big, screaming confrontation precipitated by a party game. Karam knows such set-ups and blow-ups rarely occurs in real life and wisely avoids this overused gambit which we've in such classics as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and *The Boys in the Band*. While Domingo displays wit and compassion for his characters, too much of *Dot* descends into familiar family-drama and sitcom tropes.

That's a shame because the play starts off so promisingly. We're in a chaotic kitchen, designed with an expert eye for domestic detail by Allen Moyer. It's two days before Christmas and eldest daughter Shelly, a single mom and lawyer, has summoned her siblings Donnie and Averie to help cope with their mother Dotty who is drifting into dementia (another plot element shared with *The Humans*.) As Shelly tries to get the increasingly forgetful Dotty to eat breakfast, former neighbor Jackie visits and unloads her own problems including an affair with a married man resulting in an unwanted pregnancy. It sounds contrived but Coleman injects saucy humor and realistically messy grace notes, creating a believable and insightful first scene.

But the script, acting, and Stroman's direction becomes increasingly broad as more characters arrive, including Adam, Donnie's husband (of course the gay couple are having relationship problems), and Fidel, Dotty's cute young home aide from Kazakhstan. Coleman does make some rewardingly unusual choices such as not over-emphasizing the racial and gay aspects of the situation. Dotty and her children are African-American while Jackie, Adam and Fidel are white.

But he lets the familiar jokes and melodrama take over.

The characterizations—especially Sharon Washington’s harried but loving Shelly, Marjorie Johnson’s valiant but sinking Dotty, Finnerty Steeves’ befuddled Jackie, and Libya V. Pugh’s buoyant Averie—contain sparks of verisimilitude, but they are drowned out by the play’s excesses.



The cast of *Pericles*.

Credit: Gerry Goodstein

While *Dot* employs overused 20th century templates, *Pericles* throws in everything, including the 17th-century equivalent of the kitchen sink. A latter work from the Bard which may have been co-authored by George Wilkins, *Pericles* borrows elements of *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest* and *The Merchant of Venice*. There’s also a wicked queen straight out of Snow White, bawdy panderers, bloodthirsty pirates, musicians, and dancers. The titular prince goes through an endless series of adventures including trials by riddle for a future bride, numerous battles, and losing both his wife and daughter only to be miraculously reunited with them years later. Working with an American cast, Nunn almost succeeds in making this combination shaggy-dog story and picaresque romance fun, particularly when we get to a brothel where *Pericles*’ virtuous child Marina has been brought by the aforementioned pirates. Patrice Johnson Chevannes as a no-nonsense madame and John Keating as her lascivious servant are deliciously dirty when sparring with Lilly Englert’s spunky Marina who is determined to keep her virginity.

Shaun Davey’s delightful music and Stephen Strawbridge’s poetic lighting almost overcome the Bard’s seemingly endless melodrama, but there’s too much silly storytelling and not enough dramatic meat on this *Pericles*’ bones.

Dot: Feb. 23—March 24. Vineyard Theatre, 108 E. 15th St., NYC. Tue., Wed., 7 p.m.; Thu.—Sat., 8 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 3 p.m.. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission; \$79—\$100; (866) 811-4111 or www.ovationtix.com.

Pericles: Feb. 25—March 27. Theatre for a New Audience at Polonsky Shakespeare Center, 262 Ashland Place, Brooklyn, NY. Tue.—Sat., 7:30 p.m.; Sat., Sun., 2 p.m. Running time: two hours and 50 mins. including intermission; \$75—\$85; (866) 811-4111 or www.tfana.org.

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