

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Two From PRT

Sylvie · Wednesday, August 16th, 2017

Pacific Resident Theatre (PRT) is never shy about taking on large or controversial productions or simply anything that strikes them as worth doing. This can be said of the current offerings seen over the weekend of Eugene Ionesco's seldom-staged 1959 play *Rhinoceros*, and Anthony Minghella's pair of short radio one-acts first performed for the BBC, *Hang Up* and *Cigarettes and Chocolate*. All offerings deal with older texts, but are contrasts in effectiveness, with Minghella's work, which dates back to the mid-1980s, wearing well.

And *Rhinoceros*...?

Rhinoceros has not worn quite so well, beginning with Derek Prouse's translation of the Ionesco play, used for this production, which now feels much too literal. Not that *Rhinoceros* was ever less than overwritten, because it was always intended to emphasize a lifelong theme: Ionesco's preoccupation with the cacophonous impossibility of human communication.

But almost 60 years later, when our 24-hour news cycle is a lot like living in a permanent tower of babble (*sic*), Prouse's translation is not only long (with its two intermissions, the production clocks in at close to three hours), it also rings false. Aside from the dated syntax, which manages to overstate the overstatement, it is also trivializing and in desperate need of a more vivid colloquial approach. Theatre being the living organism that it is, presenting such older pieces without allowing for the natural evolution of language reduces them at the very least to sounding quaint.



l-r: Jeff Lorch, Sarah Brooke, Keith Stevenson and Carole Weyers in *Rhinoceros* at PRT.

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With a plot that revolves around the transformation of an entire population into these ancient small-brained perissodactyls, *Rhinoceros* was seen in its day as a response to the rise of Nazism. After Charlottesville, need I point out its relevance. That it coincides with the emboldened manifestations of home-grown *neo*-Nazism and other fascist flailings is a good reason to revive it. But it needed some revisitation and streamlining to retain its punch.

Director Guillermo Cienfuegos (responsible for the excellent staging of Pinter's *The Homecoming* at PRT last year) was aiming for a farcical approach to this absurdist satire. However, comedy, let alone satirical comedy, demands a commitment to seriousness for the funny in these aims to be

fulfilled.

Between the weakness of the translation and consequent overcompensation by the actors, this *Rhinoceros* becomes a tediously drawn-out event. The exception is Keith Stevenson in the central role of the meek and alcoholic Bérenger, the lone hold-out in this little French town's stampede to conformity. But it is not enough to save the production.

Set designer David Mauer missed an opportunity to simplify things had he created something simpler, more abstract and less cumbersome than the creaky realistic sets he delivered (although some comic business in the second act with a Fire Dept. ladder brought some genuine comic relief). Dan Cole's realistic rhinoceros masks and Christopher Moscatiello's sound design, including the pounding of rhinoceros hoofs, made the chosen cut. No point in belaboring the rest.



l-r: Keith Stevenson, Carole Weyers and Jeff Lorch in *Rhinoceros* at PRT.

Next door, in the smaller theatre, Minghella's *Hang Up* and *Cigarettes and Chocolate* offered a readers' theatre version of these two British radio plays that are as much monologues as they are pre-iPhone telephone conversations. *Hang Up* is a conversation between lovers that turns strange before it turns ugly. But some exchanges in *Cigarettes and Chocolate* are entirely addressed to an answering machine belonging to a woman named Gemma (Marwa Bernstein) who has taken up a vow of silence. In all cases, the idiom and the words reflect the 1970s and 80s.

Focusing on male-female sexual relationships (*The Hang Up*), with the addition of non-sexual male-male or female-female friendships (*Cigarettes and Chocolate*), they are vivid and faithful renderings of the follies and tribulations of the younger inhabitants (ourselves?) of an era we still remember well. These exchanges — sometimes gossipy, sometimes exalted, sometimes needy, taunting or self-wounding — are unfailingly human.

Loaded with stammers and indirect or unfinished sentences, their meanings never elude us. They are, in fact, a perfect example of language as a lifeline to our imperfect communication and our unending confusion about love and life. Directed with a clear and steady hand by Michael Peretzian (who, a program note tells us, was once Minghella's agent), they are as captivating as they are entertaining.

The actors performing them embody their characters with zest. One beef, however, that is not unique to this cast, is the tendency of American actors to speak as though to themselves instead of projecting to the audience they're supposed to reach. It is a lingering and destructive Method Acting legacy. Combined with the fact that these actors — as well they should and deserve — frequently also perform in television and film, they too often seem to forget that in the theatre, no matter how small, articulating well remains important, especially when a moment is deeply felt. Breaking into contorted tears is merely mawkish, when what's required is to feel the emotion and speak it clearly.

Add to this mix the need for British accents, as happens here, and damage can easily be done. Congratulations to Ursula Brooks for delivering an eager and sweet performance as Lorna that almost entirely avoids that damage and to Jaxon Duff Gwillim for avoiding it altogether as Alistair (though it remains a mystery why the name of his South American psychologist/maid is pronounced *Conception* instead of *Concepcion* as the script intends).

On the whole, though, Minghella, who is best remembered for his novel, *The English Patient*, and the splendid film based on that novel, has given these actors (and us) a challenge and a gift. And on the whole, they acquit themselves with enviable distinction.

Top image: l-r, Keith Stevenson, Robert Lesser, Peter Ebling and Brad Greenquist in Rhinoceros at Pacific Resident Theatre.

Photos by Vitor Martins

WHAT: *Rhinoceros* and *Hang Up / Cigarettes and Chocolate*

WHERE: Pacific Resident Theatre, 705½ Venice Blvd., Venice, CA 90291.

WHEN: Thursdays-Saturdays, 8pm; Sundays, 3pm. Ends Sept.10.

HOW: Tickets \$25-\$34, available at 310.822.8392 or online at <http://www.pacificresidenttheatre.com>

ABOUT HAMILTON...

The Metashow has finally arrived at the Hollywood Pantages, where it remains until December 30. Not having seen it, I gladly assume that it's worthy of all the attention that it has received because I have nothing but profound admiration for Lin Manuel Miranda's exceptional talent. Whether *Hamilton* is worth the metaprize demanded for a ticket to see it is another matter and a highly personal decision. So personally, I am not a fan of dynamic pricing, i.e. prices that go up in proportion to demand, not value.

Dynamic pricing is a widely used if relatively new phenomenon in theatre ticket selling, favored particularly by not-for-profit regional and other theatres. I find that more acceptable, because not-for-profits have a much greater struggle just staying alive.

But the commercial theatre has caught on and it troubles me that the cheapest advertised ticket for *Hamilton* on the Pantages website is \$299, assuming you can find one at that price, while the most expensive will run you a cool \$1,739, assuming you can find one at that price. It's a free country, which means that if you have the cash, you're free to spend whatever amount of it you choose on any ticket — if you can find one.

Yes, there is a lottery. Yes, you're welcome to try that, as well as some credit card and other deals. There is even a *Hamilton* App dedicated to selling you all things *Hamilton*. Just go online.

Predictably, the Pantages is curtailing its dissemination of press tickets for the show, and I am curtailing my desire to see it. Too rich for my blood. At least for now, although there is no reason to think things will improve.

We'll see what happens in the coming weeks.

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