

STAGE REVIEW

The Boston Globe

Smart, shifty Spanish history lesson

By Sandy MacDonald, Globe Correspondent | September 18, 2008

PAWTUCKET, R.I. - Where has Friedrich Schiller's 1787 political thriller "Don Carlos" been hiding all these centuries? Lurking, according to Gamm Theatre artistic director Tony Estrella, under an all-but-impenetrable mound of verbiage. The German original, he notes, runs about 50 percent longer than the full four-hour "Hamlet." As both adapter and adroit director, Estrella has so skillfully extracted the play's essential structure, along with its psychological acuity and improbable flashes of humor, that I for one wouldn't mind if it did run six hours (miniseries, anyone?).

In any case, in its present form, two action-packed hours fly by.

What we're seeing is so many removes from authentic 16th-century history (Schiller conflated events to suit his purposes, and Estrella, post-slashing, rewrote every remaining line of an 1847 English translation) that the factual underpinnings almost don't matter. But the basic situation is this: Don Carlos, thwarted heir apparent to the Spanish throne, doesn't like the way that the king, Phillip II, and his religious and military cronies are terrorizing the Protestant-leaning province of Flanders. He also doesn't like the fact that his father has claimed the hand of Elizabeth of Valois, who was supposed to be his wife, not his stepmother. Juicy, yes? Just wait until the accusations of "incestuous" infidelity start flying.

Running parallel to the domestic drama, and ultimately overtaking it, is a plot hatched by Carlos's childhood friend, the idealistic Rodrigo, to gain the confidence of the king in order to convince him not only to liberate Flanders but to entertain the notion, mid-Inquisition, of free speech and thought - concerns clearly more germane to Schiller's own era than Don Carlos's, but also still strikingly relevant during our own.

I won't pretend to have grasped every wrinkle in the rapidly shifting plot; it's so riddled with hidden agendas, you're not supposed to know which end is up. Seduced by the superb stagecraft, including Sara Ossana's set and David T. Howard's lush costumery, I was content to succumb to the storytelling skills of a confident writer and a cadre of engaging actors.

In embracing Shakespearean free verse, Estrella has withstood the temptation to indulge in fake-Elizabethan folderol. Despite the occasional anachronism, his script is lean, mean, and as powerful as it is accessible. Spectators will find themselves adapting to the semi-antiquated diction as easily as the actors seem to.

As the title character, Steve Kidd unfortunately jars from start to finish with his 1950s quiff, high-pitched voice, and rugged soap-opera-hero smile. But then you're not really supposed to know what to make of Don Carlos. Is he truly, as his father (mesmerizing Richard Donnelly) helpfully points out, a "fickle, whiny, heartsick boy" or merely a young man who has never been allowed to come into his own?

Georgia Cohen is warm and lovely, a stalwart presence, as the purloined queen (even if her French accent falters). Amanda Ruggiero as Princess Eboli, her young lady-in-waiting, starts out a bit too Valley Girl-giddy but achieves shattering vulnerability as the tide of court intrigue turns against her. Christopher Francis Byrnes and Normand Beauregard are well matched partners-in-conivance: a pandering priest and Philip's military right arm. Sam Babbitt puts in a chilling appearance as the ancient and, ironically enough, blind Grand Inquisitor, the Rove-like puppet master who has been pulling the king's strings all along.

The play as a whole, however, belongs primarily to Alexander Platt as Rodrigo, the interloping agent of change. Platt alone knows what's going on behind Rodrigo's ever-watchful eyes, and we hang on every subtle shift. ■