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"American Night" a Satirical Collection of Fun at Cal Shakes

By Lou Fancher



Sean San José as Juan José and Richard Ruiz as Teddy Roosevelt in Cal Shakes' "American Night: The Ballad of Juan José" by Richard Montoya, directed by Jonathan Moscone. Photo Kevin Berne

about American freedom.

And predictably, chasing the illusive illusion involves time travel encounters with familiar, but decidedly ramped up folks, like a gun-toting Teddy Roosevelt, a Sacagawea in hot pink tights, a Ku Klux Klansman and his KKK-swaddled infant, and Joan Baez and Bob Dylan - "You should have taken the drug money," a pot-smoking Dylan advises José.

One of the show's delights is how it tears up the history books, not just with satire, but with pen-it-in additions as it brings out little-known-but-true stories like that of Viola Pettus, an African-American nurse who fearlessly treated anyone sickened by the 1918 flu pandemic and Ralph Lazo, who voluntarily incarcerated himself in the Manzanar internment camp to support his Japanese friends.

If the script's Google references and Obama inserts fall flat and are over-worn, the remaining humor's bite adds enough snap to keep the dialogue fresh. Actors tend to pick up the pace as a play runs; this one needs to fly swiftly to stay aloft.

José (the actor, not the character) is so finely cast in his role, one could almost miss exactly why. It's not his disarming humility - although it adds to his charm - it's plain old solid technique. Never dropping a line; consistently cycling through an escalating build-destroy-build pattern; often massaging his delivery to intensify his fellow actors' personas - his performance is worth the ticket price alone, forgiving the tired compliment.

But to overlook the remarkable craft of the ensemble sharing José's spotlight would be a mistake. Dan Hiatt is all grand mannerism and convincing pomposity in a number of roles; Sharon Lockwood makes one wish there were a half-dozen more roles for her to explode to hilarious effect (the Danville blond is the ultimate); and Tyee Tilghman graces the stage with fiendish likability and other mixed/meaty portrayals. Margo Hall, Richard Ruiz, Todd Nakagawa and Brian Rivera shine in a blizzard of behaviorally challenged characters. Dena Martinez imbues her multiple roles and shows her range with everything from insouciance to heightened hysteria.

Costumes are as much a part of the show's success as the actors and Martin Schnellinger's ability to deliver a pun through textiles is exceptional. If it's possible to sew ignorant aura into a uniform, he's done it. Set Designer Eric Flatmo's corrugated steel walls, spiraling barbed wire and pumped-color billboard backdrops provide a stripped-down visual playground for Cal Shake's jostling production. If there are holes in the narrative fabric, strong acting and Moscone's deft touch with the disparate elements deliver plenty of food for thought and fun for all.

"American Night: the Ballad of Juan José," presented by California Shakespeare Theater, runs through June 23 at the Bruns Amphitheater, 100 California Shakespeare Theater Way (off Highway 24), Orinda. For information, call (510) 548-9666 or visit www.calshakes.org.

Cal Shakes careens into the 2013 outdoor summer theater season at Orinda's Bruns Amphitheater with Richard Montoya's pumped-up "American Night: the Ballad of Juan José," directed by the company's artistic director, Jon Moscone. A little slapstick, a lot pop culture and liberally splattered with humorous, intentional offense, the massive series of vignettes is mostly held together by the considerable talents of the cast. If the play at times feels disjointed, the actors are thoroughbreds; swift, smooth, powerful.

The story, developed by San Francisco's Culture Clash, a repository for Chicano comedic theater founded in 1984, travels through the needs and wants of Juan José (Sean San José), a man intent on U.S. citizenship. It would be a straight-up history lesson, except for the fact he's overdosed on studying and falls - literally, with upturned desk and thunderous sound effects - into a surreal, looping dream.

He's met by assault of every inconceivable kind. Mexican officials offer a bribe (drug money), Latter Day Saints offer a bribe (their bibles), pen-waving bureaucrats offer a bribe (sign the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, annex Oregon!) and more. Chief among the "motivators" is his profoundly pregnant wife, Lydia, and their shared fantasy



Tyee Tilghman as Ben Pettus and Margo Hall as Viola Pettus in Cal Shakes' "American Night: The Ballad of Juan José" by Richard Montoya, directed by Jonathan Moscone Photo Kevin Berne

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