Falkenstein Review

In his Introduction to Three Plays, Dave Carley, citing a term coined by George F. Walker, laments “the Dixie Cup syndrome” that afflicts Canadian theatre: “I don’t want my plays to be produced once and then tossed to the side of the cultural thruway.” Given how infrequently the words “successful,” “frequently produced,” and “Canadian play” tend to come together in the same sentence, it’s a rare pleasure to review five plays by three playwrights who have managed to avoid Dixie Cupping.

Michel Tremblay is one of Canada’s most renowned dramatists, and Past Perfect marks his return to one of his most acclaimed works, Albertine, in Five Times (1985), and its eponymous heroine, one of his favourite creations. Past Perfect, first performed in French in 2003 and translated by Linda Gaboriau for English productions that have followed, is a prequel to Albertine, in Five Times: while the original play depicts Albertine in each of the five decades of her life from ages 30 through 70, Past Perfect gives us Albertine at 20, on an evening that irrevocably determined her fate. The major event dramatized in the play—Albertine’s failed attempt to win back her youthful love, Alex, who has jilted her in favour of her sister, Madeleine—while seemingly the typical stuff of young heartbreak, proves anything but for Albertine. At the heart of the matter is her utterly consuming, obsessive—and by consequence, suffocating—passion for Alex, which, coupled with her refusal to accept that true love can ever burn less hot, drives him into the arms of the more conventional Madeleine and moulds Albertine into the hardened character Tremblay plumbs in Five Times.

While there is a beauty to the simplicity of the drama, which preserves the unities of place and time and unfolds as a series of two-person conversations between Albertine and her mother, Madeleine, her brother, and Alex, there is also an artlessness about the play and a feeling of slightness to the material that marks Past Perfect as far from Tremblay’s best work. The dialogue is often flatly prosaic, and while this may be a consequence of the translation, more troublesome is the clumsiness with which exposition is conveyed through dialogue. (“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten we came to live here precisely because your father lost his job as a translator.”) Ultimately, however, the most disappointing aspect of Past Perfect is the sense that the events it depicts are simply not of sufficient depth and consequence to be worthy of a play, that what we have here is a quickly sketched episode from the back-story of one of Tremblay’s most unforgettable characters, a scene rather than a play in and of itself.

Tremblay played a key role in the success of fellow-Montrealer Steve Galluccio’s Mambo Italiano as an early advocate of the play and translator of its first production, in French, for Montreal’s La Compagnie Jean-Duceppe in 2000. Since then, the play has broken box-office records for Montreal’s Centaur Theatre, has received several other successful North American productions, and been adapted as a feature film. Like the work to which it is frequently compared, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Mambo Italiano mines a similar vein of mainstream humour based on ethnic stereotypes and inter-generational conflict in a hyphenated Canadian family. Galluccio’s play centres on the sudden decision of Angelo, a gay Montreal writer, to come out to his family. The deeply traditional (and very stereotypically Italian) parents of both Angelo and his lover, Nino, fall into hysterics and collectively contrive to “cure” their sons of their homosexuality by setting them up with some nice Italian girls. The result of the somewhat predictable hijinks that ensue is that Nino, a self-loathing homophobe who preferred life in the closet, ends up in a hastily arranged, unhappy heterosexual marriage, while Angelo looks forward to a new future, hurt by Nino’s betrayal but at peace with himself and reconciled with his now accepting parents.

Galluccio writes for television sitcoms, and Mambo Italiano bears all the hallmarks, for better or worse, of that genre. Despite its mildly controversial subject matter, it is also about as shocking, provocative, and cutting-edge as an episode of Will and Grace. The flipside of its mainstream success, however, is that the play and its film adaptation have undoubtedly served as a catalyst for dialogue about homosexuality for many people, especially from the Italian community, for whom the subject has previously been taboo.

Toronto playwright Dave Carley is one of Canada’s most prolific and produced playwrights, and Three Plays brings together three of his most popular works, Midnight Madness, Writing With Our Feet, and Into, all of which have received numerous productions. The appeal of Midnight Madness (first produced 1988), one of Carley’s earliest plays, is not hard to understand. A simple, charming, character-driven two-hander, the play depicts a fateful encounter in a furniture store bed department between two thirty-something former high-school outcasts: Wesley, living a life of quiet, lonely desperation as a furniture salesman in a dying store in the dying downtown of a small city, and Anna, a single ex-teenage mom and wild child looking to build a more bourgeois life. Their re occasions much mutual reflection and recrimination regarding the disappointments of their lives and, for Wesley in particular, the resolve to begin again, in a future that the play’s ending suggests just may include Anna.

Carley notes that it wasn’t until after Midnight Madness that he began to break away from “restrictive . . . claustrophobic” naturalism. The two other plays in the collection show just how liberating this discovery was for a writer with such a delightfully inspired imagination. Writing With Our Feet (1990) offers a voyage through the mind of Jean-François, a recluse who lives in a garage beneath a Montreal freeway on-ramp, on the day he finally musters the courage to venture into the outside world. JF’s is a strange mind indeed, visited by a parade of wacky relatives (including his amputee cousin Alphonsinette, inventor of the spray-on condom), famous real-life designer Raymond Loewy, and his beloved, recently deceased sister Sophie, with whom he perfected a system of writing with the feet as insurance against ever losing their arms. As much as the play is a tour-de-force of comic writing of the off-the-wall variety, it is also an affecting metaphor for the folly and sterility of solipsistic artistic isolation.

Into, inspired by a Julio Cortazar short story, is a surreal work of dramatic magic realism about four people, an “Urban Nun,” a businessman, a lonely young woman, and a volatile youth, trapped in a traffic jam that stretches from hours to days to months. As other groups (including The Chip-eaters, The Dental Confederation, The Disaffected White Youth, and The Bourgeois Confederacy) emerge from the primordial river of social anarchy that the freeway has become, the four must similarly overcome their initial differences to forge a functioning community in order to survive. Note-perfect and utterly compelling in the fantasy world it creates, and simultaneously hauntingly dystopian and blackly comic, Into is a poignant exploration of the dynamics of contemporary urban alienation. Like the other plays in the collection, it demonstrates Carley’s gift for social observation and his ability to walk the knife edge between despair and rapture where the richest and darkest comedy dwells.

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