



Michael Giltz, Contributor BookFilter creator

Theater: F. Murray Abraham Anchors "Nathan The Wise"

04/14/2016 03:10 am ET | Updated Apr 14, 2017

NATHAN THE WISE** 1/2 out of ****

CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

This warm-hearted story about religious tolerance has the shape of a Shakespearean romance, the insight of a Michael Frayn drama and the soul of a fairy tale. Director Brian Kulick hasn't quite woven all these strands into a cohesive evening of theater; the scenic design by Tony Straiges is especially indifferent. But a fine cast and the probing intelligence on display in this piece from 1779 make it an enjoyable one.

Oscar winner F. Murray Abraham is the wry center of the story as the Jewish merchant Nathan The Wise, a man too modest to call himself such a name but deserving of it nonetheless. After a long and profitable business trip, he arrives home in the Jerusalem of 1192, a city overseen by the tolerant Muslim Saladin. And before he's even shaken the dust off his cloak, Nathan is beset by problems to solve.

His adopted daughter Rachel (Erin Neuffer) was almost killed in a fire but thankfully was rescued by a Templar Knight (Stark Sands). Despite repeated entreaties, this orphaned knight refuses to receive her thanks and shrugs off Nathan as well. Meaning well, her Christian nurse reveals to the tempestuous young man that Rachel is not Jewish but in fact was baptized a Christian. She thinks this will smooth the way to an expected romance. Instead, the Templar is outraged. While professing tolerance to Nathan, he is aghast, imagining the worst and blurts out the "crime" without naming names to the Christian Patriarch (Caroline Lagerfelt). Furious, the Patriarch plans to have the offending Jew burned at the stake, once he can figure out who that is.

Meanwhile, the Sultan is broke but too proud to borrow money from Nathan. So he puts the man to a test: tell the Sultan which of the three Abrahamic faiths is the greatest. Is it Judaism, Christianity or Islam? It's impossible to answer without giving insult or betraying your own faith, at which point the Sultan will be able to demand money under better terms and save face in the bargain.

So Nathan must properly thank the Templar, calm the young man's blood and perhaps wed him to Nathan's daughter, avoid the wrath of the Christians, appease the Sultan, answer his riddle of religion without giving offense and loan the Sultan the money he needs without embarrassing the ruler. It's a tall order, but he is Nathan the Wise, after all.



The play was written by Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and is performed here in a recent translation by Edward Kemp. It has an elemental appeal, thanks to revelations peppered throughout the show and the storytelling prowess of Nathan. Clearly, its appeal for today lies in seeing this 18th century play imagine a more tolerant world where people of good faith might live side by side in respect, even in Jerusalem.

That comes through loud and clear here, with religious text displayed on the back wall throughout much of the show and act two beginning with two actors performing salat, the daily prayer that Muslims enact five times a day. (According to my phone's compass, they were not facing Mecca, but it was done respectfully and added nicely to the gravitas of the show.)

In general the scenic design did the story no help. That text was superimposed on what I assume is a modern day image of Jerusalem. [Actually, it turned out to be a photo of a neighborhood in Syria, for no good reason.] It included crumbling homes (from rocket mortars?) capped with a satellite dish. That modern intrusion with its mixed message distracted throughout. The stage featured ten chairs in the back so the cast was mostly present throughout, observing the others, while the floor was casually filled with rugs and pillows. One rug was spread out while two others were rolled up. Of course, you waited for them to be unrolled and one finally was. Instead of being joined right away by the other, the second one remained unfurled. Then in a scene of anger almost all the carpets were hurled this way and that...except for the unrolled carpet which now, inexplicably, was unrolled. Now? After the rest have been put in disarray? Since the rugs were almost the central element of the set, this was a confusing and arbitrary choice.

The acting was similarly slapdash in style. As a friend of Nathan, the appealing George Abud seemed to be arriving from a musical comedy, while the often compelling Stark Sands was at a furious boil throughout as the Templar. The women had less interesting parts, though Lagerfelt had fun as the righteous Patriarch. Austin Durant had presence as Saladin. Still, you'd be hard-pressed to know they all inhabited the same world.

Also, a certain clarity was lacking in the ending, filled as it was with last-minute reprieves and unexpected

revelations. One should approach the final scenes with pleasure as all the pieces lock into place. Yet instead of going, "Oooh!" as all was made clear, one grappled with the genealogy of various people and new information. You left thinking, "OK, so if this person was the father of that character, then who....?" and so on, rather than glowing with satisfaction.

But it was Abraham who dominated, not by dominating but by quietly anchoring the performances of everyone around him. As the story grew more serious, Abraham's dignity and wisdom shone through. You never doubt he'll have an answer for the Sultan about which faith is the greatest. Thanks to Abraham and the text, you are never in doubt as to the thrust of the story and its eagerness to encompass all faiths in their complexity and contradictions. And no one is in doubt that Abraham can still hold a room in the palm of his hand simply by saying, "Let me tell you a story...."

THEATER OF 2016

Employee Of The Year (Under The Radar at Public) ***
Germinal (Under The Radar At Public) *** 1/2
Fiddler On The Roof 2015 Broadway revival with Danny Burstein ** 1/2
Skeleton Crew ***
Noises Off (2016 Broadway revival) ** but *** if you've never seen it before
The Grand Paradise ***
Our Mother's Brief Affair * 1/2
Something Rotten ***
Sense & Sensibility (Bedlam revival) *** 1/2
Broadway & The Bard * 1/2
Prodigal Son **
A Bronx Tale: The Musical **
Buried Child (2016 revival w Ed Harris) **
Nice Fish ***
Broadway By The Year: The 1930s at Town Hall ***
Hughie **
Pericles (w Christian Camargo) * 1/2
Straight ** 1/2
Eclipsed ***
Red Speedo ***
The Royale ** 1/2
Boy ****
The Robber Bridegroom ***
Hold On To Me, Darling ***
Blackbird ** 1/2
Disaster! *
The Effect ** 1/2
Dry Powder ** 1/2
Head Of Passes ** 1/2
Broadway By The Year: The 1950s *** 1/2
The Crucible (w Ben Wishaw) ***
Bright Star **

*She Loves Me (w Laura Benanti) ****

*Antlia Pneumatica ** 1/2*

*RSC at BAM: Richard II (w David Tennant) ** 1/2*

*RSC at BAM: Henry IV Part I and II (w Antony Sher) ****

*RSC at BAM Henry V (w Alex Hassell) ** 1/2*

*Nathan The Wise ** 1/2*

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Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*