



Theater: "The Boy Who Danced On Air" Floats On Ambition



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THE BOY WHO DANCED ON AIR ** 1/2 out of ****

ABINGDON THEATRE COMPANY AT JUNE HAVOC THEATRE

Inspired by a PBS documentary, Tim Rosser (composer) and Charlie Sohne (book and lyricist) have crafted a deeply ambitious new musical set in modern day Afghanistan. It tells the story of “dancing boys,” essentially kids who are purchased or stolen and then enslaved, usually by rich men. The children are trained as dancers, displayed via performances and then sold for the night to the highest bidder, typically other rich men who want to remain “faithful” to their wives. As soon as the children hit puberty and become old enough to grow hair, they’re often discarded like garbage.

Prostitution and slavery are as old as humanity, of course; indeed this particular “tradition” is condemned explicitly in the Quran. Still, the practice is complicated by all sorts of factors: religion, a culture that denies even the possibility of queers, men who want to rape and dominate others, men who can’t admit their own gay orientation, the natural tendency for slave owners to pretend they are “good” to the people they’re treating like property and the fact that it’s quite possible that the children more likely to be sold by their families and purchased to become dancing boys are self-selected by being stereotypically gay or effeminate or just “different.”

That’s a lot for any show to deal with. Unfortunately *The Boy Who Danced On Air* also tosses in a storyline about the US occupation of Afghanistan, making a complex drama longer and more diffuse than need be. Nonetheless, it has a good production design (courtesy Christopher Swader & Justin Swader), some strong performances and songs sporting some good melodies that nod to Middle Eastern style without devolving into exotica. Frankly, it’s a small miracle that the Act One closer — “When I Have A Boy Of My Own” — doesn’t become an unintentional giggle. (In fact, while ostensibly about how two dancing boys would be kind to their charges if they became masters, it’s really an unconscious plea for love and acceptance and a kinder world.) That’s due to the seriousness of purpose and the talent involved.

Directed by Tony Speciale, the musical begins with a shadow play that cleverly emphasizes the imbalance of

power at the heart of the tale. An unnamed narrator (Deven Kolluri, not strong of voice but a solid and mournful presence throughout) recounts the story of a child sold into slavery who is trained as a dancing boy and becomes fascinated by the art. We see this before the curtain has opened, with lighting by Wen-Ling Liao tweaking the perspective so our hero Paiman (Troy Iwata) is seen in false perspective as a very little boy while his master Jahandar (Jonathan Raviv) towers over him. We quickly understand Paiman is especially talented and that Jahandar has special affection for him, allowing the boy to perform but never permitting any other man to buy his flesh for the night. To be clear, no one who enslaves another human is good in any way, but Jahandar is certainly less cruel than most.

Paiman's fate is contrasted with the battering that fellow dancer Feda (Nikhil Saboo) takes at the hand of the jokey but dangerous Zemar (Osh Ghanimah), Jahandar's cousin. Feda fancies himself a singer and longs to escape to the big city and become famous. (Who doesn't?) Their friendship blossoms into something more and they plan to run away together. Meanwhile, Jahandar is frustrated by the American-built power plant in their district. He's selected to give CNN a tour, a Potemkin village farce in which the essentially useless structure will be provided with enough fuel to power up for the day while the media is there. Jahandar sees this as a rare chance to shame the Americans into making it a real source of electricity for the region, helping it light up with possibility. Jahandar dragoons the oily Zemar into helping him expose the truth. But one can't help suspecting that man sees this as a chance to remove Jahandar from the picture and finally get his hands on the beautiful Paiman that he's lusted after for years.

The sense of place is well established by the set, which makes good use of the small space available to them.

The sound design of Justin Graziani also helps a great deal in creating the sense of wide open spaces. The choreography of Nejla Yarkin also lets us feel we're getting a glimpse at two distinct dancers with different styles and yet echoing what is surely a traditional and artistic form, whatever lascivious purposes it's put to in the end. (A final solo dance by Paiman late in the show however was too melodramatic in terms of the book and not needed.)

The songs and score do a lot of heavy lifting. Opener "A Song He Never Chose" combines the tune and narration to set up our story, explain the tradition of dancing boys, fill in years of plot and bring us up to the present. Like *The Great Comet's* songs, it and some other narrative-pushing numbers get the job done but feel a little overstuffed. Better is "With Him Around Me," a song that convinces as a popular tune in their world which Feda sings obsessively. While the Act One closer flirts with camp almost by its very nature, it also has a memorable melody. In general, most songs offer either a good tune or clever lyrics or enough new plot to help you ignore the lack. Still, they're complex pieces that deserve hearing a few more times before passing judgement.

On the down side, the book is both overly complicated and not specific enough. The subplot about American corruption and Jahandar's plans to help the region are essentially a distraction from the main story. At the very least, it seems to set up a betrayal and the death of someone — Jahandar or one of the boys — but in fact while it's possible a betrayal takes place, that's not made explicit and it really comes to nothing. Since the two plots don't influence each other, all the more reason why the corruption story should be cut, eliminating a good half hour from the current two and a half hour show and focusing it more tightly.

Further, other questions remain. Some of them surely can't be answered even by the characters themselves, but still. We should have a better sense of the truth even if they don't. Is Jahandar gay? Does he have a wife? Has she never interested him? Is he kind to his other dancing boys, if he has any? In other words, has he developed a certain possessive attraction to a boy he's used for sexual pleasure or is this a man who wrestles with deeper desire? Are either of the boys gay as we assume or just reaching out for intimacy and love anywhere they can under horrific circumstances? Were they sold off because they were gay or suspected of being gay or were their families simply too poor to ignore the money that might keep the rest of the family alive? Of course they can't voice these ideas the way Westerners might but it could at least be suggested.

Raviv has been a strong presence in *The Band's Visit* (the best musical of 2016) and *My Name Is Asher Lev* among other hits. So it's no surprise he is by far the best here, adding immeasurably to the sensitivity and nuance of the show. Perhaps it's his talent, but he also seems to have the show's most memorable songs, from "Kabul" to "Play Your Part" to "I Can See it." This character blinded by "tradition" and rules is the compelling and dramatic center of the story. Ghanimah is a little broad as the jokey Zemar but he's a vivid presence too.

The two young dancers however are tricky roles to cast. They have to be able to convince us in their skill at traditional dance, sing *and* act, all while at least seeming to be Middle Eastern in appearance, if not Afghani. It's true that both Troy Iwata as the innocent Paiman (a very believable object of desire) and Nikhil Saboo as

seemingly the more worldly and confidently queer Feda have something essentially...all-American about them. Iwata could take over the lead role in the fantasy comic musical *Aladdin* and be right at home. But as genuine modern Afghanis they are not quite convincing in some essential way. However, they're both appealing presences, with Saboo scoring better early on in his cockiness while Iwata improved when Paiman stopped being such a sheep of a boy and started thinking for himself and standing up to others. Best of all, they create an easy intimacy that makes them believable as friends turning into lovers

So it takes a little time to get going, the middle gets muddled by the political subplot and the finale is hard to swallow in its twists and awkward in a way that can't be explained well without giving up too many spoilers. Suffice to say that if a show is essentially a flashback, it somehow makes no sense that the narrator could learn things from his younger self. And if you want to show a single voice joined by others in song, just do it; don't drag it out one by one in anticlimactic fashion (the staging of *Speciale* falters briefly at the end too, with an unhelpful musical theater flourish). Still, *The Boy Who Danced On Air* is admirably ambitious indeed. It may stumble a little, but that's what happens when you leap forward.

Theater Of 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

The Liar *** 1/2

Jitney *** 1/2

The Tempest (Harriet Walter at St. Ann's) *** 1/2

Significant Other * 1/2

The Skin Of Our Teeth ***

Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 (w Groban) ** (third visit, but *** if you haven't seen it)

Everybody (at Signature) ** 1/2

Idomeneo (at Met w Levine conducting) *** 1/2

Sunday In The Park With George (w Jake Gyllenhaal) ****

The Light Years * 1/12

The Glass Menagerie (w Sally Field, Joe Mantello) *** 1/2

946: The Amazing Story Of Adolphus Tips **

The Price (w Mark Ruffalo) *

Come From Away *

Miss Saigon **

Picnic/Come Back Little Sheba * 1/2

Broadway By The Year: The 1940s **

Vanity Fair (at Pearl) ***

Latin History For Morons * 1/2

On The Grounds Of Belonging (workshop production w Bobby Steggert)

Wakey Wakey ***

Present Laughter (w Kevin Kline) ***

CasablancaBox ** 1/2

Amélie * 1/2

The Play That Goes Wrong **

War Paint **

In and Of Itself ***

Indecent ** 1/2

The Hairy Animal (covered briefly in “Mourning Becomes Electra” review) ***

The Antipodes **

Anastasia **

Charlie and the Chocolate Factory **

Oslo *** 1/2

The Little Foxes **

Groundhog Day ** 1/2

Babes In Toyland (Kelli O'Hara at Carnegie Hall) ** 1/2

Mourning Becomes Electra **

A Doll's House, Part 2 *** 1/2

Bandstand ** 1/2

Pacific Overtures (at CSC) ***

Six Degrees Of Separation (w Allison Janney) **

Twelfth Night (Public Theater Mobile Unit) ** 1/2

Rooms **

Arlington ***

All The President's Men (Public Theater one-night event at Town Hall) ** 1/2

Happy Days (w Dianne Wiest) *** 1/2

Derren Brown: Secret *** 1/2

The Whirligig * 1/2

Sojourners and Her Portmanteau **

Broadway By The Year 1997-2006 ***

The Boy Who Danced On Air ** 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.