

Theater: The Curse of 'Doctor Zhivago'

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DOCTOR ZHIVAGO no stars out of ****
BROADWAY THEATRE

Never try to conquer Russia in winter. Napoleon ignored this lesson and paid dearly. Hitler ignored this lesson and it cost him World War II. Now director Des McAnuff and his foolhardy team of craftsmen and actors have foundered miserably in that same punishing landscape with little warmth and even littler imagination. It beggars belief that this show has been in development for so long, even fully mounted in Australia and yet still they forged ahead. Investors saw what they had to work with and gave it a full airing and saw how much it lacked (the reviews weren't any better years ago) and still they forged ahead. In-demand, Tony-winning talent behind the scenes realized this wasn't going to be a feather in their cap. But they forged ahead, like those mad invaders who had come so far they couldn't cut their losses but preferred to lose it all on the vain hope of somehow turning things around.

One feels most for the foot soldiers, the actors who are always looking for work and not yet name brands who can pick a choose. A major role in a new Broadway musical! How could they say no? One understands but the choice -- unfortunately -- will be much easier for audiences.

The busy yet somehow still incoherent story is about the poet and physician Yuri Zhivago (Tam Mutu). He is part of high society despite his father's dissolute fall. Zhivago marries well, albeit dutifully; indeed, Zhivago and his wife Tonia (Lora Lee Gayer) seem bored with each other even on their wedding day.

That's when he fatefully spies the enigmatic, the beautiful, the doomed and glorious Lara (Kelli Barrett). She attempts to kill the oily Victor Komarovsky (Tom Hewitt), a hateful manipulator who preyed first on Lara's mother and then Lara herself (not to mention sucking the life out of Zhivago's father). She fails to kill him, but not before bewitching both Zhivago and Komarovsky into yearning for her over the ensuing decades.

Though Lara considers herself soiled goods, she dutifully marries the firebrand Pasha (Paul Alexander Nolan). He's always ready to mount the barricades (notably more ready for that than mounting Lara on their unconsummated wedding night). But hearing of the aristocratic Komarovsky deflowering his love sends Pasha into a frenzy. He heads off to war to incite revolution on the front lines, but goes seemingly mad, terrorizing the country around Lara's home, stalking her mercilessly and doing anything in his power to woo her back. So we have three men: the godly Zhivago of the aristocracy and Russia's glorious literary past, the cruel Komarovsky who would fit right in with Putin's gang and the crazed revolutionary Pasha who uses the cries of the powerless for his own mad designs. And they all love Lara.

That's the story. But the presentation of the story is a failure from start to finish, with the overall effect of a very poor man's Les Miserables. I really enjoy that musical but I don't know many theater buffs or critics that do. It's a nutty idea to take such a sprawling novel as Victor Hugo's and turn it into a pop opera; but by God it's effective in a broad brush-stroke way and filled with memorable tunes.

Think it's easy? We've spent the last 30 years watching people try to do it again -- A Tale Of Two Cities, The Scarlet Pimpernel, Jane Eyre, the recent Hunchback Of Notre Dame to name just a few -- but failing, often completely. On the most basic level of story, this attempt is confusing. Almost immediately Zhivago and his wife seem indifferent to each other, though I've no idea why. More crucially Lara seems to love the hot-blooded

Pasha. He goes off to war and is believed lost. Quite reasonably, she falls for the soulful and world famous poet Yuri Zhivago while they're healing the wounded during WW I. (His marriage is an inconvenience best left unmentioned.) As far as we know, Lara believes she is a widow.

Yet, her husband appears again in the small town where Lara lives under an assumed name. He terrorizes everyone else but stays away from her. So it's a little shocking and surprising to find out she knows this demon is her husband. When did she find out he wasn't dead? Wasn't she happy to see him? Why are they estranged - other than his madness, which seems mostly rooted in the fact that she won't be with him?

Similarly, Lara and Zhivago love each other deeply but he maintains his marriage and sees her only at the library. When Zhivago's wife Tonia shows up at that same library (Zhivago has gone missing), the drama is again muddled entirely. In one brief scene, we realize Tonia knows Zhivago is cheating on her, confronts Lara and finds that their mutual love for Zhivago -- not to mention Lara's shining decency and goodness -- allows Tonia to make her peace with Lara in a heartbeat. So much for drama: we're given betrayal, battle and resolution in about three minutes, tops. Countless other examples abound.

Mind you, this is a musical so if it had good songs many ills would be forgiven. It doesn't. The flat, unimaginative rhymes and bland anthems are too numerous to mention. In David Lean's turgid film version of Doctor Zhivago, Maurice Jarre's theme for Lara was pounded into the dirt. It was used so extensively that you almost despair every time it pops up on the soundtrack. The tune was set to lyrics and became a smash hit called "Somewhere My Love." That version springs up in the middle of act one, a simple folk tune sung by nurses that is like an oasis in the desert, or should I say a warm fire in the wasteland of the steppes. I was sorry they didn't give it a reprise. The one modest exception is a quiet ballad called "Watch The Moon" (Lucy Simon of The Secret Garden did the music and the lyrics are by the team of Michael Korie and Amy Powers).

Certainly the songs are sung well by a cast that is valiant even in despair. Mutu is fine as Zhivago and belts out his big numbers with passion and vigor. Nolan is especially good in the early stages, when Pasha makes a little more sense. In the thankless, modest role of Tonia, Gayer sings with a lovely tone and acts appropriately resigned. Hewitt keeps his dignity intact more than the others as the wily Komarovskiy, almost managing to create a vivid, opportunistic character out of this mess. One hates to judge any actor's talent in the context of such a show, but it must be said that Barrett is notably as misguided and bad as the show, delivering at most one broad emotion at a time when not singing in a strained voice. The pressure of Julie Christie's shadow? The strain of being the central object of desire in a train wreck of a show? Who knows?

It doesn't help that Barrett is the only blonde within a hundred miles of Zhivago. Every other woman on stage is a brunette or black-haired and I'm a little surprised they didn't ban blondes from the audience. It's a ham-fisted visual idea, typical for the show. The scenic design by Michael Scott-Mitchell is hopelessly ugly. The idea of a sort of flat-bed platform to stand in for a train is especially misguided but that's just one of many touches, like the would-be iconic jumble of chairs or the simple wooden desk that remains on stage most of the night and seems to be sat at by just about every character at one point or another.

The low point surely is an abandoned mansion at the finale where Zhivago and Lara hide out at winter. It's so cartoonish in design, with cardboard icicles hanging down from the ceiling that it looks like something one would use for a stage adaptation of a tale about Santa Claus, not a realistic epic about Russia amidst revolution.

In an awful idea, video projections are used throughout. Poorly designed by Sean Nieuwenhuis, they're desperately unattractive and distracting attempts to intimate flames and crowds and snow and other mayhem. But even they become absurd when photographs of random folk are displayed on a large scrim or the deeply unfortunate choice to have video of Lara loom overhead at two key moments. In one video/image, she is naughtily dressed and her gown lowers; in the other, she is meant to be the bewitching vision that haunts Zhivago and indeed every man who sees her. Didn't anyone see how godawful these effects were? Snow drifts

down from the ceiling every time something makes a noise or gets jarred, an unintentional precursor to the snow that will inevitably fall at the finale.

One hates to go on. The costumes by Paul Tazewell are handsome, but absurdly so. Even peasants and working class folk like Pasha look decked out to the nines in what seem to be brand new duds. If it's a character flaw of Tonia that she refuses to dress down even when it means risking the life of herself and her child, it would be nice to have that pointed out by someone. (Revolution is in the air, she's trying to slip away unnoticed and still looks like she'd draw attention on Fifth Avenue during Fashion Week.) Lighting and choreography and everything else are similarly hapless. Director Des McAnuff has enjoyed great triumphs on Broadway like *Big River* and *Jersey Boys* (which will surely be playing long after *Dr. Zhivago*) has closed. This won't be one of them.

Is it the curse of *Doctor Zhivago*? The novel was used to embarrass the Soviet Union since it takes a very jaundiced attitude towards the Revolution. (In the show, suddenly some actors come scuttling out like rats and spit out their lines like cartoon villains; they represent the revolutionary spirit. Subtle it's not.) Pasternak won the Nobel Prize but everyone he knew was threatened, his home surrounded, his mistress threatened and Pasternak had to refuse the honor, dying of cancer in two years, frightened for those he loved.

The film was a massive commercial hit for director David Lean. But it's been pilloried by critics ever since and seen its stock fall dramatically (whatever Wikipedia may say). His career was immediately entombed creatively, with Lean struggling to make just two more films in the last 26 years of his life, with one of them being the disastrous *Ryan's Daughter*. And now we have this woeful stage musical. Isn't this what out of town tryouts are for?

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