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THEATER REVIEW

'American Tales'

The double-bill musical joins romantic Twain and dark Melville

By David Ng, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer July 4, 2008

Judging by its title, "American Tales" might sound like entertainment tailor-made for the July 4 weekend. But this excellent new musical from the Antaeus Company waves its star-spangled banner with an eccentric difference.

Based on two classic 19th century works of literature, the double-bill show conjoins Mark Twain's American dream with Herman Melville's American nightmare -- a bipolar musical, in the best sense of the term.

The show swings toward romantic comedy in its first hour. Twain's "The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton" tells the story of an East Coast bachelor (Daniel Blinkoff) who dials the wrong number and ends up speaking with a total stranger -- a demure San Francisco society lady (Devon Sovari).

The two strike up a lively telephone friendship that soon develops into a long-distance romance. Eager to meet his new love, the smitten Alonzo plans to travel from sea to shining sea but gets lost along the way. Hearts get broken only to be mended in a series of outrageous plot twists.

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'American Tales'

This smart production acknowledges that for all of our so-called progress as a society, the core of human behavior hasn't changed all that much.

The second half of "American Tales" glosses Melville's dark novella "Bartley the Scrivener." The story follows a despondent office worker (Richard Miro and Raphael Sbarge, alternating nights) whose constant refrain to his Wall Street boss is an indifferent, "I would prefer not to." Bartley's refusal to work anticipates modern-day cubicle despair but on a more tragic level.

Featuring songs by Jan Powell and Ken Stone, "American Tales" is a small and modest production, like a series of doodles on the back of a Penguin Classics volume. Kay Cole's and Thor Steingraber's direction keeps the action moving by emphasizing colorfully manic performances. (The program credits include a "clowning consultant.")

The show's happy-sad mood swing points to a fault line running straight down the national psyche. To be American, it seems to say, is to be slightly demented, forever bouncing between strained cheer and hopeless depression. "American Tales" embraces both sides of its split personality, keeping them in harmonious and mutually affectionate balance.

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