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TALK BACK! DIGG EMAIL PRINT CONTACT RSS

Regional

American Tales

(Deaf West Theater; 65 seats; \$30 top)

By TERRY MORGAN

An Antaeus Company presentation of a musical in two acts with music by Jan Powell and book and lyrics by Ken Stone. Directed by Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber. Musical direction by Steven Ladd Jones and Billy Thompson.

Rosannah/Ginger Nut - Melanie Lora
 Alonzo Fitz Clarence/Nippers - Daniel Blinkoff
 Burley/Bartleby - Raphael Sbarge
 Maid/Uncle Charles/Turkey - John Combs
 Doctor/The Lawyer/ Various - Peter Van Norden

The theme of the new musical "American Tales" seems to be the difficulty and importance of human connection, a motif that resonates from the 1890s of these stories to the Internet age. Ken Stone's adaptation of short works by Mark Twain and Herman Melville, one a romantic comedy and the other a mysterious tragedy, is skillful and unusually thoughtful, bolstered by Jan Powell's understated and effective score. The world premiere production by the Antaeus Company, to borrow the last word from the show, is extraordinary.

"The Loves of Alonzo Fitz Clarence and Rosannah Ethelton," the Twain story, is a gentle and entertaining satire done in a classic melodramatic style, complete with a Snidely Whiplash-esque villain. Alonzo (Daniel Blinkoff) is a somewhat formal and unworldly bachelor living in Maine. One day he decides to call his aunt on that newfangled gadget, the telephone, but instead gets connected to young Rosannah (Melanie Lora), who lives in San Francisco. The two are immediately smitten, but thwarted suitor Burley (Raphael Sbarge) does his best to keep the lovers apart.

The second tale, Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," attempts to explore an ineffable human conundrum, and succeeds brilliantly. The Lawyer (Peter Van Norden) is initially pleased upon hiring Bartleby (Sbarge) as a clerk in his office, but gradually Bartleby ceases doing any work whatsoever, preferring to stare out a window at an old decaying wall. The Lawyer attempts at first to get rid of his frustrating employee, but ultimately finds that one way to deal with an immovable object is simply to embrace it.

Blinkoff gives an open-hearted and likeable perf as the forthright Alonzo, and deftly delivers the flipside as the waspish clerk Nippers. Lora excels, bringing warmth and emotional precision to her role as the proper yet passionate Rosannah, a model turn-of-the-century heroine, and her strong voice is put to memorable use in "Rosannah's Song" and "O Happy Me." Sbarge is properly wicked and over-the-top as the dastardly Burley, but his lost Bartleby, a performance composed largely of silence, is indelible, and his rendition of "The Wall" is sensitive and affecting. Van Norden is superb as the sympathetic Lawyer, registering every emotional milepost on a journey from rejection to acceptance, and he sings the show's challenging songs well. Finally, John Combs offers nuanced and amusing support as missionary Uncle Charles and the gossipy clerk Turkey.

Co-directors Kay Cole and Thor Steingraber deliver a pitch-perfect take on the Twain story, making full use of Laura Fine Hawkes' striking and quirkily embellished fractured-map set to detail Alonzo's odyssey. Their use of signs to represent everything from locations to weather to emotional state in the song "The Faithful Traveler" is inspired, and the vocal harmony of the actors is lovely. The co-directors wisely focus on the power of Melville's story and Stone's adaptation in "Bartleby," a decision that pays dramatic dividends. Stone's writing and lyrics in this piece resemble Sondheim's "Sweeney Todd" in intelligence and musical style, and take what seemed like a very unmusical piece on the page and make it sing a haunting tune.

Sets, Laura Fine Hawkes; costumes, A. Jeffrey Schoenberg; lighting, Jose Lopez; sound, John Apicella; production stage manager, Young Ji. Opened June 27, 2008, reviewed July 12; runs through Aug. 17. Running time: 2 HOURS.

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