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Bach at Leipzig

at the Odyssey Theatre

Reviewed by Dany Margolies

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Enci

It's 1722 in Leipzig, Germany. The Thomaskirche is in need of a new music director. Germany's top organists and choir leaders descend on the church to apply for the job. That much is true, as is the fact that J.S. Bach eventually got the gig. And thereby hangs Itamar Moses' tale, its basso continuo made up of polemics on art and religion, its high notes ornamented with puns.

But the clever writing is mere grist for the mills of director Darin Anthony and his six actors. Well, there's a seventh, but, like a viola player, who's counting? And all characters are named either Johann or Georg.

Rob Nagle plays the Johann who should have been the successor Kapelmeister but who broke with him over the role of religion in music; Nagle is superb, a subtle comic with sad truths in his eyes and full dramatic command of the stage. Joel Polis plays the widower Georg who has toiled at a second-rate job; Polis is sharp-tongued and heartbreaking, intellectual and territorial. Dominic Conti plays the Georg whose musician's fingers are nimble enough to forge letters of recommendation; Conti is the clown of this troupe, with a hilarious gangliness that probably belies his Georg's talent at the keyboard. Henry Clarke plays the womanizing young Johann; Clarke is comfortable from bewigged head to tidily shod foot in period posture and heightened language. Leland Crooke plays Georg the duped husband, then the fool who suddenly speaks wisdom; Crooke is adorable in befuddlement, admirable in lucidity. Bill Brochtrup plays the Johann who is the second-greatest organist in Germany but loaded with insecurities; Brochtrup is a magnificent showman, then a huggably lonely little boy. And Michael Cavanaugh plays a rock-star Georg Phillip Telemann, silent in the play.

A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's costumes, reportedly made from scratch for this production, along with period shoes, and wigs, are sumptuous. Kurt Boetcher provides sound gags and bone-rattling organ

music.

As old as the Baroque era is, the jokes here are older, the philosophical debates older still, but man's competition to be top dog is eternal. Yet we are, at our cores, connected—a brethren who struggle through life and then sometimes take the time to appreciate its beauties, or even make them.

Presented by and at the Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., L.A.

June 13–Aug. 9. Thu.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 2 p.m. (Also Wed., 8 p.m., July 8–22. Dark Sun., 2 p.m., June 14, July 19, Aug. 9.) (310) 477-2055 or www.odysseytheatre.com.

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