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Bach at Leipzig at the Oddysey Theatre

Posted by [Geoff Hoff](#) on Jul 8th, 2009 and filed under [Reviews](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#). You can leave a response or trackback to this entry

by Geoff Hoff

Itamar Moses's play, *Bach at Leipzig*, is an exquisite spider web of a fugue, the fustiest and most rule laden musical form, he tells us in the beginning of the second act. But also, as he also tells us through his noble, stalwart character Johann Friedrich Fasch (played by the noble, stalwart Rob Nagle) because of this rigid structure, the form in which the most sublime music can flow. The main thread, or "theme" to use the musical term, is presented by Fasch and each subsequent character that enters presents his own theme which is neatly intertwined with the rest. Themes are then repeated with slight variation by different actors, pairs of actors and even trios.



Add to this learned discussions of philosophy, of the distinctions between Lutheranism, Calvinism and other branches of the Protestant Reformation, of levels and degrees of predestination, of politics and of music and musical styles and how they relate to philosophy, Protestantism, politics and predestination. And even new age affirmations, believe it or not. These discussions are all quite serious, subtle and profound. And, of course, profoundly silly. "Why must everything have a name?" One man asks in frustration with all the subtle differences in faith. "So that," he is told by another, "we know what houses to burn."

As each of these characters, themes and discussions is introduced and intertwined with the rest, as each is repeated with subtle variations in tempo, tone, modality and rhythm with inversions and the counterpointing of triplets with double time, it builds in dynamic fluctuation until it reaches a climax both expected and surprising (a requirement, we are told, of any good fugue.)

Okay, enough with the musical symbolism. It is all much more amusing in this script than I can make it sound in my review. Mr. Moses is a very good playwright.

The story, set in the Thomaskirche (St. Thomas Church) in Leipzig, Germany, is of several composer/organists come to audition for the position of organist of the church and head of

the musical school attached to it after the old master, Johann Kuhnau, dies suddenly at the keys of the organ, (producing a discordant chord with his face – if it had been more angular, we are told by angular Georg Balthasar Schott played by Joel Polis, it would at least have contained pleasant thirds.)

All of the assembled musicians are named either Johann or Georg (pronounced “GAY-org”). All musicians of the time, it seems, are named either Johann or Georg, which is why middle names are so important. It is an historical fact that all the musicians that Mr. Moses assembled here were, indeed, invited to audition for this post, but, as is noted by the author, this is largely a work of fiction, merely inspired by “the barest outline of a few real events” and the characteristics of the musicians at hand are “by and large, the playwright’s invention.”

The production of *Bach at Leipzig* at the Odyssey Theatre was mostly good, although there were some problems, which I’ll get to in a moment. All of the actors were quite good, and each deserves a mention. The play starts with a very sweet, earnest monologue by the very honest Johann Friedrich Fasch. He is played by Rob Nagle, who is solid in his portrayal of Fasch’s desire to do right, be proper, yet pave his own way after all these years.

Georg Balthasar Schott is organist at another church in Leipzig, one that’s “under a bridge and on the other side of town”. He was never, after several attempts, admitted as a student of the great master, and wants to procure this position as a sort of vindication. He is played by Joel Polis as a smart, tightly angry man. We never doubt his desire, nor his motivation, to succeed. Georg Lenck, who is too poor to afford a middle name, is an accomplished musician, and, we suspect, a rogue, pick-pocket, highwayman and political provocateur. He is played by Dominic Conti, an almost Marty Feldman-like comedian.



Johann Martin Steindorff is a young rake who’s father is a king. He beds all women, young or old, yet still represents the church in his land and argues convincingly for the spiritual life. He is played by the very sexy, very funny and courageous actor Henry Clarke. Who has great butt cheeks. You’ll see. Georg Friedrich Kaufmann is an old, affable, gullible man played by Leland Crooke, who is delightfully, charmingly befuddled. Johann Christoph Graupner’s greatest curse is that he is only the second greatest organist in Germany. He is played with delightful foppery by Bill Brochtrup, who is constantly frustrated in his desire to be first in something. Anything.

Even Michael Cavanaugh (no, not the older



character actor, not the musician) who plays Georg Phillip Telemann, the greatest organist in Germany, who only walks across the stage silently a few times is amazing. Mr. Cavanaugh walks across the stage with confident arrogance, exuding the air of someone who is the best organist in Germany, and who know it.

Bach at Leipzig is directed by Darin Anthony. In the promotion for this production, we are told to imagine the Marx Brothers and Tom Stoppard collaborating on a play. Of course, this is a quote from a review of the play in Milwaukee. Unfortunately, there was little Marx Brothers here, at least in act one. In the first act, I was intellectually aware of the humor (or, perhaps, aware of the intellectual humor), which is a sort of death. There were attempts at physical humor – people backing others up in lockstep, etc. – it seemed a little off. A little conscious. I was engaged with the story and people, but didn't much laugh.

This was not the case in the second act, where the physical, verbal and intellectual humor came together (ah, the fugue) much more seamlessly, culminating in an hysterical sword fight amongst all the musicians complete with all their individual quirks and characteristics, very well staged by Bill Madden. (If you read much of my work, you'll know I have a thing about badly done sword fighting on stage. I was delighted by this one.)

The costumes, by A. Jeffrey Schoenberg were lush and well designed, each appropriate to the time and fully expressing the character and circumstance of the man wearing it. The sound design, by Philip White, was startling and very effective, evoking place, time and mood in the dark transitions between scenes, or giving a counterpoint to it, well before we go to the scene itself. The set, by Kurt Boetcher, was problematic. We are told the church is the grandest, most beautiful building in Germany, yet the set, unfortunately, looks like the back door of a tavern or stable. It is a well designed and constructed back door of a tavern or stable, but still.

Bach at Leipzig is performed Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 2 pm through August 10, 2009 with 7 pm Sunday performances on July 10, 19 and 31.

The Odyssey Theater is located at 2055 S. Sepulveda, Los Angeles, 90025, one block north of Olympic Blvd.

Ticket prices: Wednesdays through Fridays - \$25.00
 Saturdays and Sundays - \$30.00
 Senior & Student rush - \$5.00 off except Saturdays
 Student/SAG/EQUITY/AFTRA - \$15.00 on Fridays
 "Pay-What-You-Can" on July 10, 19 & 31

Reservations online at www.OdysseyTheatre.com or by phone at (310) 477-2055.



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