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Road Show (review)

Alisa Roost

CUNY Hostos Community College

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the society that forms it. The children of Reagan, “selfish and greedy and loveless and blind,” who peopled *Angels of America* are now the children of an even more alienated and alienating age: the age of iPods and neo-liberalism. Pill cheats on Paul with the young hustler Eli (Michael Esper), while Eli, seemingly the body reified, loves and is then left by Pill. Vic cursorily slept with sister Empty’s lesbian lover Maeve, impregnating her with a child Empty doesn’t want. The nonfamilial Adam buys the family home to bring back his sometime lover, always ex, Empty.

Not only do these personal relationships reflect the inability to form lasting human connections in the present sociopolitical world, but the family itself has lost its connection to the past, to its lineage. Personal amnesia becomes collective as Gus incinerates the family archives. Aunt and niece are left contemplating their loss of family history in a room framed by the fractured, increasingly de-historicized skyline of New York City, where the profits of quick development have destroyed the concept of home . . . a place to belong throughout time.

Wendland’s set, visually bracketing off one scene from another on the proscenium stage, highlighted the abject isolation of characters bereft of temporal, spatial, or relational matrices. Wendland left characters stranded as one setting moved swiftly and mechanically into place, thoroughly displacing and dissolving the previous setting. Pill leaves Eli in the bed as the emerging Marcantonio dining room pushed Eli’s sparsely furnished apartment off the stage; the half-naked Eli, left adrift in a no-person land of disconnection and abandonment, doesn’t even have a familiar wall left to tell him who he is and where he belongs.

The end of the play brings Shelle (Michelle O’Neill) to give suicide instructions to Gus, who was her dead husband’s union co-worker. Singing the union song, alone, as she leaves Gus to die, Shelle illustrates the tremendous cost of the loss of the collective: the end of the individual as a political, social, and hence human being. But Gus is not alone in death: Pill’s ex-hustler lover Eli appears, ready to do anything for \$300. We began the play with the sterile sensuality of a cell-phone conversation between lovers and ended it with the profound loneliness of a self-inflicted death with a stranger; the patriarch pays the market price for human care and contact.

In Greif’s direction, the family scenes often degenerated into a meaningless cacophony of multiple people arguing; simultaneous scenes lacked the punctuation needed to highlight juxtapositions of word and thought; and there are repetitions in

the text that, as yet, lack the consciousness that would give power to reiteration. It was a world premiere, and the performance was still evolving. The actors, many of whom are Kushner veterans, worked together wonderfully, but the onstage synergy did not yet extend outward to the audience; the loss of human connectivity that is mourned in the work was then replicated in the relationship between performance and audience. The consciousness of the characters now needs to surface in the performance with Kushner marking his, and our, complicity with the commodification of artwork and self; then, not only will the Marcantonios realize the human and social cost of this era of hyper-capitalism, so will we all.

JEANNE WILLCOXON
St. Olaf College

ROAD SHOW. Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim, book by John Weidman. Directed by John Doyle. Public Theater, New York City. 6 December 2008.

Stephen Sondheim and John Weidman have collaborated on three of the most unusual musicals—*Pacific Overtures*, *Assassins*, and *Road Show*—all of which deal with the negative impact of elements of the American Dream, a theme Sondheim has interwoven into many of his shows. Sondheim and Weidman and their directors also have experimented with techniques unusual for the commercial musical stage, including Brechtian alienation and traditional Japanese theatre conventions. *Pacific Overtures* explores the effect on Japan when the United States demanded access to trade. Featuring two Japanese characters influenced by American culture, it allows the audience some of the traditional pleasures of emotional identification. *Assassins*, a meditation on the dark side of the American Dream, examines the motivations of presidential assassins. The main characters reveal their passionate and intellectual underpinnings, thus giving the show surprising moments of emotional resonance. A few group numbers delve into the societal conditions the motley characters share, but the beauty of the individual solos is more chilling. When John Wilkes Booth sings his magnificently evil thoughts, the moments create a weird dissonance between his passionate commitment (and the beautiful music) and his horrific acts. Unusual in its subject material, *Assassins* is one of the more successful uses of *Verfremdungseffekt* in the American musical theatre: enticing audiences into identifying with the passions of the characters, and then being utterly repelled by that identification.



Michael Cerveris (Wilson) and company in *Road Show*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

Road Show tells the story of two antagonistic brothers at the turn of the last century as each pursues his own version of the American Dream. *Road Show* has had three major incarnations with three different directors. In 2000, the show (then known as *Wise Guys* and directed by Sam Mendes) applied a light touch; Nathan Lane and Victor Garber sparkled with vaudevillian humor and witty repartee. The various issues relating to the dark side of the American Dream percolated without a particularly didactic edge, while humor, wit, and charisma drove the show. The second act had not been finished by the beginning of the run, leaving only delicious possibilities. With a phenomenal cast in an unusually small theatre, *Wise Guys* allowed Garber and Lane to pull the audience into their camaraderie. Their charisma may have overshadowed the work itself, but, to my mind, it remains the most successful version of the show.

In 2003, Harold Prince collaborated with Sondheim on *Bounce*, for which a cast album is available. In the post-9/11 environment, the show became larger, with more focus on the broad scope of the brothers' lives without focusing on a specific theme. Strongly plot-based with little character introspection, the Mizner brothers had more romance (heterosexual for Wilson, homosexual for Addison) and more of a happy ending. The show touched on a

variety of themes: sibling rivalry, dueling visions of the American Dream, artistic passions, and the interplay of various forms of capitalism with art and con games, but it never explored any single theme to satisfaction.

In 2008, John Doyle directed a sparse production of the piece, now titled *Road Show*, tightly focused on the economic themes. Serendipitously timed, the show premiered in the midst of the economic meltdown. Early in the show, the boys' father tells his sons that their choices will be "determining what kind of nation we'll be," forging a life from the riches of nature and their own determination. Wilson (Michael Cerveris) embodies the "cocaine-fueled con game" of unregulated capitalism under the Bush administration, dabbling in anything that could gain him wealth or notoriety, feeding his drug habit and ego. The Boca Raton housing crisis, a major plot point in the show, comments on our recent disastrous economic bubbles.

In sharp contrast, Addison Mizner (Alexander Gemignani) serves as an archetype for what many see as the upside of capitalism; his round-the-world tour is a subtle history of Western colonialism, for he visits only former colonies. Unlike his country, Addison is interested primarily in benign capitalism. His attempts to invest in local businesses fall apart; only his hodgepodge of cultural knickknacks has any

worth, and that collection inspires his architectural career back in the States. Addison designs beautiful houses and the money he receives seems to go toward supporting artists, showing a relatively positive side of capitalism. Unfortunately, the poison of Wilson's unbridled con-game of capitalism destroys any redeeming elements of Addison's vision: everything, both personal and professional, is demolished for the frantic demands of acquisition.

Addison is the first openly gay character that the openly gay Sondheim has written, but the show won't be known for that. Addison is a workaholic who seems involved with his lover almost tangentially, and he refers to Hollis (Claybourne Elder) only as his "partner" (despite Hollis's using the term "lover"). At one point, Addison and Hollis share a love duet, but while Hollis is plainly singing to Addison, Addison is singing to his architectural models—clearly distancing the audience from any delight in their relationship—while alluding to "My Friends" from *Sweeney Todd*.

Doyle's production emphasized the Brechtian elements of the show. The chorus, dressed in outfits that have architectural drawings printed onto fabric sewn into period clothes, sang directly to the audience as the lack of masking highlighted various overtly theatrical elements. Actors milled around as the audience entered, and the ensemble remained onstage throughout, watching the action as it unfolded. The set, cleverly constructed of trunks and chests of drawers designed for architectural blueprints, allowed small props to indicate various location and time changes, though it remained static for the entire production with no attempt at verisimilitude.

Road Show demands that audiences let go of conventional expectations. Musical theatre often portrays people who are either relatively upbeat or able to sing of emotions they could not articulate otherwise, so the music explores their vulnerabilities or shortcomings. Sondheim often creates emotionally compelling though not particularly nice characters, such as Bobby in *Company*, who cannot express his feelings and pushes people away; the title character in *Sweeney Todd*, whose passions revolve around vengeance and murder; or both eponymous characters in *Sunday in the Park with George*, who connect more with art than people. Sondheim has plumbed the emotional richness of characters, with the trajectories of his shows often mirroring the trajectory of successful therapy. "Boy meets girl; boy loses girl; boy gets girl back" has been transformed to: "Boy has complex; boy recognizes complex; boy takes definitive step to allow vulnerable connection and move past complex." This production of *Road Show* leaves that approach behind, demand-

ing that audiences develop primarily an intellectual appreciation.

ALISA C. ROOST

Hostos Community College, The Bronx

OF MICE AND MEN. By John Steinbeck. Directed by Adrian Hall, assisted by Matthew Earnest. Resident Ensemble Players. Thompson Theatre of the Roselle Center for the Arts, Newark, DE. 28 February 2009.

OF MICE AND MEN. By John Steinbeck. Directed by Michael Patrick Thornton. Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Chicago. 2 May 2009.

The monumental economic disaster of the last year has raised the specter of the Great Depression in America, so two productions of John Steinbeck's poignant 1930s novella, *Of Mice and Men*, held special resonance for audiences this theatre season. The legendary Adrian Hall (founder of Trinity Repertory Theatre in Rhode Island) directed the first production with the Resident Ensemble Players (REP) in Newark, Delaware. The second production was a Steppenwolf for Young Adults offering at the venerable Steppenwolf Theatre of Chicago, directed by Michael Patrick Thornton (artistic director of the Gift Theatre Company of Chicago). While the acting was uniformly polished and nuanced in both productions, the directors found greater challenges in meeting the demands of the 1937 stage adaptation, with all its disparate locales and stylistic shifts.

Both acting ensembles excelled in capturing the essence of Steinbeck's heartbreaking fable of the American dream. Although the Steppenwolf actors necessarily stood in the shadows of the highly acclaimed Steppenwolf production of 1980 (starring John Malkovich and Gary Sinise), the current ensemble offered finely crafted interpretations by Paul D'Addario as George and Keith Kupferer as Lennie. Robert Brueller gave a gritty, well-grounded performance as Carlson, and Jessie Fisher (Curley's wife) and Richard Henzel (Candy) were other notable standouts in a fine cast. The REP's production was part of the inaugural season of this professional, Equity company at the University of Delaware. Here, the acting was equally polished and moving, rooted in the finely tuned and touching performances of Michael Gotch (George) and Mark Corkins (Lennie), who created so tangible a bond of friendship and mutual need that spectators were compelled to sit on the edge of their seats. Equally effective portray-