

Colossal performances transcend truncated narrative

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FROM MONDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL
JUNE 9, 2008 AT 4:08 AM EDT

Sanctuary Song

Theatre Direct and Tapestry

Luminato Festival

At the Berkeley Street Theatre,

in Toronto on Thursday

The charming *Sanctuary Song*

is a Luminato family show that is both accessible and challenging to children at the same time. The production combines music, dance and the spoken word, and is composed by Abigail Richardson with a libretto by Marjorie Chan.

The story is about an Indonesian elephant called Sydney (soprano Xin Wang), who is poached by hunters and sold to an American circus to be trained as a dancing elephant. When her leg is injured in a ship's fire, Sydney is sent to a zoo. Her twilight years are spent in an elephant sanctuary.

The production revolves around Sydney recalling key incidents of her life in conversation with her faithful zookeeper (bass Alvin Crawford). Her fondest memory is of her playful elephant friend Penny (actor/dancer Sharmila Dey). Actor Frank Cox-O'Connell performs the poacher, ring master and sanctuary keeper.

Unfortunately, Chan has confined most of the happenings to the mind of Sydney, and reflection makes for very static theatre. Happily, *Sanctuary Song* is saved by its score and production values. Richardson's Asian-influenced music is lively and evocative while being modernist and melodic.

The score, performed by a small ensemble (piano, violin and percussion), includes a good measure of striking musical effects deftly conducted by Wayne Strongman. What we don't see is at least heard in the music, for example the vibrancy of the circus and the menacing horror of the fire. Richardson's music literally speaks volumes as a tone poem of a life's journey.

With Sydney talking more than showing, it falls to choreographer Viv Moore to breathe some physical life into Chan's libretto. Her movement for Sydney and Penny is quite lovely. The slowly gesturing right arm is the elephant's inquisitive trunk, while the side-to-side, slow undulations of the body convey the animal's stately walk. Particularly beautiful is the way the two elephant friends wrap their trunks lovingly around each other's faces. When Chan's libretto actually allows for action, such as the elephant friends' hide-and-seek game, the production finds vigour.

Director Lynda Hill has gone for the poignant, and Wang's performance as Sydney is very touching. She has a sweet expressive voice that conveys the melancholy we see on her sad face. For a singer, she moves most gracefully.

Crawford has a big, commanding voice he has to reign in for a small theatre. We see a bit of the development of his friendship with Sydney when he gives her a watermelon when she first arrives at the zoo, but basically, the two just talk to each other. In this confined role, Crawford shows as much love and compassion as he can.

Kelly Wolf's modest set comprises of a ramp and hanging chains. The latter conveys both jungle and imprisonment. A small, oval overhead screen is the forum for the video projections of Luisa Quintavalle. In fact, it is these constantly shifting images that provide the reality. What is happening on stage requires a great deal of imagination, although the schoolchildren at the performance I attended clearly had no problem accepting a tiny singer as a behemoth.

Wolf's costumes for the elephants are clever. As an homage to their Indonesian roots, the women wear the tunic jacket and flared pants of Southeast Asia. Their wigs have wrapped side braids to convey the large elephant ears.

Lighting designer Andrea Lundy has also infused energy into a static story by flooding the stage with colourful depictions of the events being told. The fire scene is strong visually.

Although we have to settle for Sydney's recollections as the show's mainframe, the performances are so good, the music so suggestive and the stage picture so inviting, that *Sanctuary Song* is able to overcome the physically limiting nature of the narrative.

Sanctuary Song continues at Berkeley Street Theatre Downstairs until June 14.

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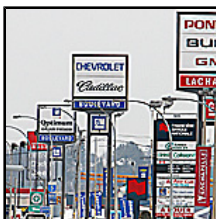
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