

BACKSTAGE WEST

THE ACTOR'S RESOURCE

July 3, 2003

FOUR

at Beverly Hills Playhouse

Reviewed by T.H. McCulloh

Like playing poker? Many evenings of one-acts are like a stud poker hand. You might get dealt a pair of jacks and nothing else. This evening is different. Playwright/director Milton Katselas has dealt his audiences four aces, a rare winning hand in the genre. All four of these short plays are shining examples of good writing, insightful direction, and top-notch performing. It's a winning hand all around, dealing with male/female relationships and their pitfalls and joys.

Only one of the plays rings a familiar note. *Gibran*, set in the West Bank, concerns an Israeli girl and Palestinian man, a subject that has been covered before onstage, once even in a homosexual context. But this time the girl (Hilit Pace, alternating with Tania Gonzalez) works for the U.S. government, albeit struggling for peace, and the man (Isa Totah, alternating with Shaun Duke) is a suicide bomber, bringing it up to date in a way. Their struggle for the survival of their relationship is examined with an energetic script, volatile, interesting performances, and the right kinetic energy.

Harem (co-written with Michael Shurtleff) examines five women, each the mistress of the same very rich man (unseen), brought together by his business associate Betty (the nicely reserved Lee Garlington). At 5:15 p.m. Betty is to read a letter from the man that will obviously change their lives in some way. The women know one another, and their sparring is entertaining and full of rich characterization. The actors all turn in excellent, colorful performances, particularly Julie Cobb, playing the mistress who claims to have satisfied him sexually, and understudy Hate Hodge as the independently wealthy socialite.

Rising even above these two, *The Rite of Spring* has concert pianist Colin practicing Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto for his important upcoming Carnegie Hall concert. Suddenly he is interrupted by two of his mistresses, who begin by battling, then join hands in putting Colin exactly where he belongs: alone. Allen Barton's Colin is a delight, moving back and forth between romantic power and vulnerability, a subtle comic turn ably abetted by Marianna Elliott and Julia Nickson as the women.

The ultimate joy of the evening is the performance of Christian Svensson in *Goya*, about a young artist in a volatile relationship with a Latina girl (Justina Machado, alternating with Lana Parrilla). Imagining himself being devoured by her as Satan devours sinners in Goya's painting, Svensson rewards the playwright with an unforgettable comedic spin from obedient slave to frustrated anger to minor attempts at control. At one point he even asks her meekly if he could be on top for once as a change. It's a masterful blending of writing and performance.

"Four," presented by Camelot Artists Productions at the Beverly Hills Playhouse, 254 S Robertson Blvd, Beverly Hills. Fri.-Sat. 8p.m., Sun. 2&7 p.m. June 19-July 27 \$25. (310)203-1334.