

A dream performance

AT THE THEATRE

Simple sets, profound thoughts in A Noise Within's 'Life is a Dream'

By Anne Louise Bannon

For all translator Kenneth Cavander presents us with a remarkably accessible script for A Noise Within's exquisite production of "Life is a Dream," it doesn't hurt to remember that Pedro Calderon de la Barca wrote the play in 1635 in a country still under the thrall of the Inquisition.

Co-directors Julia Rodriguez Elliot and Geoff Elliott wisely focus on the theme of what is reality and what is dream, otherwise the ending — strongly supporting a hierarchical status quo — would probably land on the audience like the proverbial ton of bricks.

Calderon uses the fable of a king trying to beat fate to explore the ideas of wisdom and folly, reality versus the greater reality of heaven and where we all fit in society. For all its emotional elements, this is really a play of ideas that can be traced all the way back to the theology of St. Thomas Aquinas, with which Calderon was certainly familiar, being an alumnus of the Jesuit Colegio Imperial (The Jesuits, or Society of Jesus, formally, have a strong affinity for St. Thomas Aquinas). Not to mention the folly of thwarting fate theme, which dates back to the ancient Greeks. For all people compare this play to Shakespeare's Hamlet, it has far more in common with "Oedipus Rex."

Traditionally in a play from this era, the opening would be King Basilio of Poland (William Dennis Hunt) explaining that the son everyone thought was stillborn is actually alive, but has been raised in a dungeon in chains. The boy's horoscope showed a horrible revolution with the king, his father, bowing at his feet if the boy were allowed to come to manhood.

Instead, Calderon first shows us the imprisoned Segismundo (Geoff Elliott), who neither knows who he is or why he is imprisoned. He is discovered by Rosaura (Abby Craden) and her servant Clarin (Stephen Rockwell). Rosaura, dressed like a man, is on her own mission of honor. But she is intercepted by Segismundo's jailer, Clotaldo (Mark Bramhall), who recognizes her as his daughter, though she does not recognize him.

At court, Basilio has decided that he will test Segismundo by bringing him home and seeing what happens. Segismundo is drugged so that if he fails and is returned to his prison, he will think the beauty of court is but a dream. Not surprisingly, Segismundo does fail. But after he is returned to the dungeon, he is rescued by poor peasants who do not want the foreign Duke Astolfo (Robertson Dean) to inherit the throne. It turns out Astolfo has abandoned Rosaura to go after his cousin Estrella (Jill Hill), who has an equal claim on Poland's throne. But if the two marry, then there is no contest.

After re-awakening in the dungeon, Segismundo is never sure whether what he is experiencing is reality or another dream, but therein lies his salvation.

Elliott's performance as the wretched prince starts out a little over the top. But it says a lot about Elliott's skill as an actor that after not giving himself any room to push his performance any further, he finds a completely different and organic direction to go in. He masterfully keeps our attention during Segismundo's long

ponderings over his fate, and later, over what is real and what is dream and what that means.

In fact, there isn't a bad performance in the entire cast. OK, Dean could have given Astolfo a little more life, and Rockwell's strongly American attitude made Clarin a tad jarring. But Rockwell more than pulled it together for his final scene where, he, the fool, teaches the wise old king.

Michael C. Smith's perfectly simple set, with its mirrors and hanging chains, beautifully set off the themes without hitting us over the head with them. Costumes, by Anna M. Wyckoff, also complemented the themes, but while the leads' clothes were mostly accurate for the 17th century period, especially with the tie-in sleeves (sleeves weren't sewn into clothes until later that century), the courtiers' dresses all had

zippers — an Industrial Age invention. Given the amount of time these ladies had their backs to the audience, one has to wonder if that bit of economy was necessary.

One can go into the whole theoretical thing about whether or not a translation becomes a separate work unto itself. But there is a real trick to translating a period work such as this, making it accessible in the current language without making it too modern, so that the sense that this is an almost 400-year-old play is not lost. Cavander, who was commissioned by ANW to do this translation after his highly successful translation of "Oedipus Rex" last year, mostly succeeds. There is the odd modern phrase, but nothing that really leaps out and screams "this doesn't belong!"

And this play is definitely a product of its time and place. While there is much to be explored on the philosophy front, you can really tell that it was written under the Inquisition. It takes just the right touch not to let the leaden result of oppression overcome the fascinating ideas it presents. But, if anything, just the right touch is A Noise Within's greatest gift.

"Life is a Dream" is in repertory at A Noise Within's theatre, 234 S. Brand Blvd., Glendale. Call (818) 240-0910 for tickets and information.

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