

February 23, 2020

Response for director Kelley Schoger's production of *The Servant of Two Masters*

On Sunday, February 22, 2020, I had the pleasure of attending the University of Alabama's production of *The Servant of Two Masters* directed by Assistant Professor Kelley Schoger. I have no prior knowledge of Ms. Schoger's work nor have I had the opportunity to meet her. I would also like to point out that in my 30 plus years as a director, I have only directed one commedia play since I am not drawn to this kind of material. This said, I was impressed with a production that clearly had a solid director's hand to unify the world of the play that was created through inventive staging, imaginative lazzi, and strong ensemble work.

World of the Play

When I entered the theatre, I was intrigued by the romantic starlit sky complete with a Van Gogh-like painted moon and beautifully rendered planets. Although I am still pondering the meaning of the planets, the overall effect set a tone that was realized beautifully by the director in the opening moments of the play. Having a servant woman framed by the romantic sky gazing into the distance who is then rudely interrupted by the loud, intrusive, bumbling servant, effectively created the language of the play we were about to experience. The utilitarian set was well-executed and offered the director options that included a platformed stage for better sight lines, the above staircase and upper windows for visual variety, and the apron for intimacy and comic effect. The director used these elements quite successfully. The exquisite costumes also contributed greatly by giving the audience a shorthand into the personalities of the various characters and assisted the actors and director in bringing the stock characters to life. The creative collaboration between director and designers gave us a unified world that served the play quite well.

Staging

Keeping a long play with little plot interesting is heavily reliant on the physical life that is created through blocking and character work. Ms. Schoger did an admirable job keeping the play moving and found humorous bits with both the ensemble and lead players. I particularly enjoyed moments such as Pantalone laboriously pulling himself up the staircase or Clarice plopping down on the floor when she was thwarted in love or Florindo dragging himself across the front of the stage as he wept. The set gave the director a somewhat flat playing space but her inventive use of the apron, wings, and the above helped to break this up and provided more visual layering. Also, her clever staging of silent scenes behind the drapery furthered the storytelling and added to the comic effect. Schoger used every available space and allowed her actors to interact with the architecture (particularly the floor) and divan to great effect. Her stage pictures were varied, the movement was driven by character objectives, and the foibles of the characters were realized through strong physical choices.

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Acting work

Creating interesting, full embodied stock characters can be a challenge for young actors. The director is responsible for developing a consistent style that the entire company must embrace. Ms. Schoger accomplished this. From my point of view, the most successful work was from Evan Hart and Matt Kelley who exemplified the kind of attention to detail that commedia demands. Hart's Pantalone was wholly realized physically and vocally. Although his repetition of vocal choices became a bit predictable, his physical work was excellent. The mask was never a hindrance to this actor, but instead allowed us to engage in the strong physical choices he made throughout. Matt Kelley also lived fully within the given circumstances and found both the heightened style and the vulnerability which made his work thoroughly engaging. It was clear that the director encouraged her cast to improvise contemporary references that brought an amusing sense of topicality to the piece. The most successful modern touch was when the three women broke into a pop song that served to comment on the specific action of the scene. I would have enjoyed more of these kind of wonderful moments and less of the actual text as I think the show could have benefited from some judicious cutting.

The director's work with the actors can best be described by Caitlin Brianna Hicks who thanked her "for providing us with a space for our wild, messy hearts to be free." This sincere compliment speaks to the positive creative atmosphere fostered in the rehearsal process. The company of actors, led by solid direction, embodied the style of the production and were fully committed to the world that was created.

Conclusion

Kelley Schoger directed this production with lively staging, well-paced scenes, a unified world, and a lovely sense of fun. Her work managed to engage many of the young audience members that were present the day I saw the show. They responded with laughter throughout and cheered during the curtain call. To make this often unwieldy material successful with today's audience is no easy feat, but Kelly Schoger combined expertise in work with her actors and inventiveness in staging, proving her up to the task. The University of Alabama is fortunate to have a woman of her talent on its faculty.

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