

Orientalism exploded

Pera Palas, written by Sinan Unel, directed by Michael Michetti

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4 August 2005

Pera Palas, written by Sinan Unel, directed by Michael Michetti. Co-produced by the Antaeus Company and The Theatre at Boston Court. Boston Court Theatre, Pasadena, California. West Coast premiere. July 23-August 28, 2005.

Beyond the lovers quarrels, intra-family feuds, near-farcical entrances, and (tasteful) bathroom jokes, Sinan Unel's *Pera Palas* is a play about self-identity. The play attempts to address what it means to be Turkish, English, American, a father, a son, a sister, a wife, gay, modern, emancipated, traditional, secular, Islamic, addicted or even infertile. Given such an ambitious menu of identifiers, the wonder of it all is that *Pera Palas* doesn't disintegrate into a soapy cavalcade. Rather, this play wrestles intelligently with something that has plagued the educated classes of certain "developing" nations—Orientalism and its many hand-maidens.

Orientalism, in its most familiar form, is a habit of mind indulged by colonialists and imperialists that essentializes the other as exotic and unbridgeably alien. Think of how generalities about Iraq and its people or Islam in general are bandied about by self-appointed experts. These pronouncements are typically uttered with the same self-serving smugness with which some pontificate about, say, Merlot. Orientalism, however, becomes problematic when those under colonial or neo-imperial sway—be they Turkish, Asian, Iraqi Arab, Latin, African—internalize the imperial culture's tropes, deferring to the imagined superiority of its values, and suppressing or rejecting their own in the name of modernization or progress.

While Orientalism in its varied manifestations is very much on the minds of playwright Sinan Unel and his characters, Orientalism is chiefly a concern to those sufficiently and self-consciously cosmopolitan to be aggrandized or aggrieved in these games of cultural one-upmanship. (For an extended critique of Edward Said, the radical expatriate Palestinian whose 1978 book *Orientalism* made the term a commonplace in academic/intellectual circles, see David Walsh's 1993 article, "The objective character of artistic cognition.")

Set in Istanbul, *Pera Palas* (the name of a famous old international hotel) focuses on three defining moments of Turkish social, cultural, and political history: 1918-1924 (the end of World War I to the birth of the Republic); 1952-1953 (the height of American influence); and 1994 (when an Islamic revival challenged 70 years of official secularism). Constantinople/Istanbul—its double name indicative of its bipolarity—is the East-West's border town. The Bosphorus has often been identified as the place where Asia and Europe collide. Each period treated in this play marks a major collision.

In the first, with the European powers carving up the former Ottoman Empire, the principal foreign players were French and British. It was a time when French became the preferred language of Istanbul's elite. Even as women's suffrage and emancipation were stirring in the West, young Turkish women were still being relegated to the harem. The primary relationship in this stratum of the play is that of Evelyn Crawley (Jeanie Hackett), a self-consciously progressive Englishwoman, and Melek

(Rebecca Mozo/Tessa Thompson), her devoted young Turkish friend.

The sociologically inclined Miss Crawley is invited to observe firsthand the secret sisterhood of the harem. She struggles to suspend judgment on its mores, pushing herself to accept the customs of the household on its own terms. She ultimately fails. She rails against Melek and both the British ambassador and Melek's father (a Pasha and Turkish diplomat). The Pasha's earlier deference to Evelyn, as embodiment of all things modern and British (in stark contrast to his casual disrespect for his wives, daughter, and feminist son), makes him a poster-boy for the pitfalls of Orientalism. His suicide coincides with the fall of the Sultanate and the collapse of his world of privilege.

In the second period (the early 1950s), the post-war influence of the United States finds expression in the tale of two sisters from Ohio who teach at the American school in Istanbul. The younger sister (Angela Goethels/Tamara Krinsky) is hungry to break out of the cloistered life of the school. She falls in love with Orhan (Ramon de Ocampo), a handsome, charming young Turk, the only son of a well-off, well-connected Turkish family. His dark intensity coupled with her gleaming blonde lightness epitomize a familiar Western fantasy/fear of miscegenation. Their naïve faith in love's power to conquer all slams up against the prejudices of both Orhan's and Kathy's families. Separated by language, customs, tastes, and religion, problems in the marriage appear early when Orhan—in love with all things American—is summarily rejected by an American oil company for a job. He knows that he's been rejected because he's Turkish, and he learns that imperial America is not and never will be his friend. Internalizing his disillusionment, Orhan takes out his frustration on his wife and begins to self-medicate with booze, cigarettes, and solipsistic rants (habits that ferment for 40 years).

The play's last period, 1994, finds Murat, the son of Orhan and Kathy, having just returned to Istanbul with Brian, his American lover of eight years—an echo of the Kathy-Orhan "mixed marriage." Murat avoids contact with his family, but Brian, taking matters into his own hands, contacts Murat's sister, Sema, a full-bore modern woman, a tough no-nonsense attorney, with secrets of her own (she's addicted to some Turkish Valium-substitute, and she's been involved with a married man for 10 years). Brian is intoxicated with the exoticism of this place, yet afraid to fully experience it; his first brush with the local cuisine (roasted lamb intestines) is the source of the play's litany of bathroom jokes. Brian is, in some ways, the consummate vacationer, eager to sample the exotic yet unwilling to give up his homeland's habits (and prejudices). And Murat is a classic returnee, a prodigal reshaped by his years in New York, encountering his native city with fresh eyes, alien values, and old memories.

All three time periods coexist on stage with scenes from each period playing simultaneously, intercutting and literally crossing through each other. Ten actors play 27 roles. Three of these "doublings" offer such resonance that, had they been separately cast, powerful parallels and contrasts would have been lost. Other "doublings," however, feel as if

they are simply a way of reducing the cast size.

As Evelyn Crawley and Sema Bayraktar, Jeannie Hackett gives a tour de force portrait of two women separated by nearly a century. (One can only imagine the backstage frenzy of her many quick coif and costume changes.) Each in her own way is independent, strong-willed, sharply opinionated, yet still struggling against expectations of gender. Crawley tiptoes at the edge of “going native.” Sema has stepped into the neverland between two cultures, wearing her Western manner like a well-fitted mask. Each blasts away at the hypocrisies of her native culture. Ms. Hackett manages to reveal both the similarities and differences between Crawley and Sema, allowing us to see and feel the unrelenting pressures of being an independent woman confronting vested patriarchies while experimenting with the freedom of adopting a multicultural identity.

As Cavid, the neglected and scorned son of the Pasha’s first, and subsequently neglected wife, Bill Brochtrup captures the pathos of a lost soul, damaged by the harem system, who finds his voice as a feminist firebrand even while holding these submissive veiled women in contempt. Like early twentieth century Turkey’s privileged classes, Cavid is lost in the limbo between an idealized (and highly selective) Western (i.e., modern) paradise and the inescapable residue of his own history. While Mr. Brochtrup’s Brian is marred by too overt (in my opinion) gay mannerisms, they do get laughs, but often at the expense of subtlety. Nevertheless, Mr. Brochtrup manages to suggest that, under different circumstances, Cavid and Brian could be very much the same, each superficially eager to sample the cultural values of “the other,” yet unwilling to fully embrace or understand them.

The doubling of Ali Reza (the Pasha, Melek and Cavid’s father, a diplomat representing the last Sultan) and Joe Brown (Kathy Miller Bayraktar’s bluntly parochial brother-in-law, an American oil exec) suggests just how similar these two roles are in their respective worlds. These are the kind of men who do the bidding of their political masters, who unthinkingly repeat the nostrums of their own respective cultures. Mikael Salazar sharply distinguishes the two roles through sheer physicality.

The doubling of Apollo Dukakis as an odalisque of the harem (1918) and as Orhan’s mother (1952), however, pushes the envelope of high camp, making what should be an emotionally important scene into a drag sketch. Likewise, the use of certain women as men draws too much attention to the choice, seriously distracting us from the content of the scenes.

In sharp contrast to his “drag” scenes, Mr. Dukakis’s portrait of the older (1994) Orhan is so rich, nuanced, and by turns poignant and bombastic that it stands out in this universally superb cast. He manages to reveal volumes in simple actions, the small specificities that evoke an entire life, a world in a gesture. The masterful writing, acting, and staging of this climactic scene in which the prodigal son returns create a kind of perfect storm of every contradiction in the 80 years of Turkish cultural history embraced by this piece.

The set by Tom Buderwitz is a brilliant work of constructivist art, a Rauschenberg-like construction some 30 feet high and 90 wide, a totemic grab bag of Turkey in the Twentieth Century. Sadly, it’s less successful as a playing area.

Director Michael Michetti does a masterful job of choreography. The scenes that need to tear at us, do; those that need to make us laugh, also do. His staging, however, is somewhat limited by restricting portions of the set to specific locations. It’s as if the entire stage has been turned into a soundstage, with different sections camera-blocked to hide adjacent sets. With lighting often generalized, this sometimes leaves the actors floating in some vaguely “exotic” space, their little playing areas dwarfed by the constructivist collage. We suspect that this show was overproduced. Some roughness might have (counter-intuitively) enhanced the experience.

This is a play that works on its audience through juxtapositions (both

ironic and evocative) and parallelisms that remind us that questions of self-identity in a shifting world are and will always be with us. That its characters wrestle with what they love and what they hate about the West and about themselves is what gives this work a satisfying depth and breadth.

No single play, even one as ambitious as *Pera Palas*, can hope to capture the full complexity of a region as turbulent as twentieth century Turkey. Regional historical events are referred to, but they generally serve as fleeting historical markers and contextual backdrop (just as the set serves as an iconic collage). Significantly, many are ignored completely: the contradictory nature of the Kemalist revolution, including the 1921 extermination of Turkey’s nascent Communist Party; the U.S.-backed military coup of 1980; and the genocidal campaigns against Armenians and Kurds. Absent too are the political purges, the mafia-like corruption, the fascistic Grey Wolves, and the Kemalist hijacking of Islam for nationalist ends. (For more on twentieth century Turkey, see the numerous articles by Justus Leicht in the archives of this site, and in particular Mr. Leicht’s critical overview of the Turkish Republic’s 75-year history here.)

The play’s view of class is similarly restricted. Only three servants appear—a bellhop, a handmaid of the harem, and a household cook. All are subservient. One is left to wonder what they make of their self-absorbed “masters.” The tens of millions of Turkish peasants and workers remain invisible, hidden behind the walls of the Pera Palas hotel, Melek’s harem, and the Bayraktar household. The hotel itself, perhaps intentionally, serves as a kind of cocoon from which its temporary residents are cosseted from the roiling streets outside. With this play, the Pera Palas takes its place alongside such hotels as Saigon’s Intercontinental or the Baghdad Hilton, famous for their guest books, infamous for the imperialist ambitions nurtured in their rooms.

Pera Palas offers insight into the dangers of ethnic stereotyping and the pathologies of Orientalism. Even though it focuses on the tribulations of the bourgeois elite, it still forces us to examine the uncritical acceptance of the kinds of generalities that provide the foundations on which imperial adventures are mounted and on which occupying armies depend, the kind of national prejudices that smother international consciousness. While *Pera Palas* may on the surface appear as a period play and a sometimes soapy family saga, it is the kind of relevant, challenging work of theater that, given its onerous production demands, is rarely seen. More’s the pity.



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