



WVOX AM 1460

New Rochelle, NY

Wednesday, August 15, 2007

Reporting from Off Broadway.

This is Isa Goldberg.

At Primary Stages there's a string quartet. Let's start again. It's a story about a fictional string quartet performing Beethoven's OPUS 131, a radical piece for its time, since it redefined the structure of the string quartet as a form.

So now you have a very clear premise: four talented musicians who want to perform the Everest of string quartets. OPUS invites comparison to a more grandiose literary work namely, Thomas Mann's DOCTOR FAUSTUS in which the central character, a composer makes a pact with the devil in order to secure his years of creative productivity. Written after the rise of the Third Reich, Mann's novel not only evokes the Faustian myth, but also describes the fascist regime in Germany.

Although the gifted quartet in Michael Hollinger's OPUS is not at all famous, it receives an invitation to perform for President Bush at the White House. And with it comes the requirement that they perform a specific piece of music. As Elliot the first violinist describes it, "it sounds like a Tampax commercial." So, the four set out to pursue their love of achieving heights and instead they perform OPUS 131.

But their trajectory takes unpredictable twists and turns and what sweeps us up is the play's unusual structure...the way musical phrases lift the conversation to an idyllic state, and the contrapuntal structure of the scenes in which surprise meetings, chance encounters and the secret lives of the musicians are revealed. Still, the focus remains on these realistic, seemingly obvious characters – a narcissistic first violinist, Elliot heretofore known as Nelly, the talented but psychotic violist Dorian, the beautiful young woman who replaces him, the divorcee who befriends her and the cellist - now there's the instrument with the most mellow of sounds. In that role, Douglas Rees holds us captive, albeit unsuspectingly.

While the pacing at times is a little slow, the four actors work together harmoniously. It's that sense of unison, the ability of four musicians to create the feeling that they are all playing a single instrument that is the play's central metaphor. As Elliot puts it, quoting Goethe, FAUST's creator, it's "a discourse among four reasonable people."



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Sounds like a highly democratic state.

But it also has an edge, as Dorian describes their music, “it’s just...pulsating, like it’s alive, like some living pulsing organism...Copulating with itself.” But when they finally perform for President Bush, the music is more than their own self-fulfillment, at least unto their reports the President was moved, “he had tears in his eyes.” And the Lazara String Quartet? Having arrived at the dizzying top of Mount Everest, what do they see?

Thoughtfully directed by Terrence J. Nolan with an adept cast including Michael Laurence as Dorian and Mahira Kakkar as Grace, OPUS is an entertaining evening that will keep you thinking, at least during a few moments.

I’m Isa Goldberg.