Stirring 'Candide' finds hope in spite of dark times

Mike Fischer, Special to the Journal Sentinel
Published 8:00 a.m. CT Aug. 8, 2017

Since its 1956 debut as a Broadway musical, Leonard Bernstein’s “Candide” has traveled to more places – and proven even more adaptable, as it’s gone through seemingly countless versions – than its optimistic protagonist.

But even Candide might have quailed at the prospect of staging this piece – usually presented with a huge orchestra, a chorus and multiple sets tracing Candide’s progress around the globe – with a cast of just eight, accompanied by piano and flute on a stage with no sets and minimal props.

Welcome to that best of all possible worlds known as Third Avenue Playhouse, an 84-seat black box theater in Sturgeon Bay where director James Valcq has once again defied the odds. Valcq has remade “Candide” as story theater: Drew Brhel’s narrating Voltaire takes us through the novella he wrote, while the ridiculously good singers who surround him make that story come alive.

Michael Penick and Kaleigh Rae Gamaché sing this ill-fated pair’s song of innocence and experience, making clear from the start what an odd, seemingly mismatched couple they are. Penick’s marvelously limpid tenor is as pure as the guileless face of his Candide, whose childlike innocence is stunningly misplaced but also increasingly inspiring; he is a holy fool, of the sort embodied by that man from La Mancha who tilts at windmills while seeing the best in everyone.

In her face and in the impeccably controlled artifice of her coloratura soprano, Gamaché conveys what’s brittle and hard within a woman who is often tough because she has to be.
As Cunegonde and her duenna (a delightful Becky Spice, channeling the Wife of Bath) sing, women in this world don’t have many choices. They learn to “Glitter and Be Gay” – and yes, Gamaché delivers this fiendishly difficult song and emerges intact – because they can’t afford to think much about their lot. Hence Anna Cline’s playful, cheerfully upbeat performance as a put-upon soubrette.

Cunegonde’s many seducers include characters played by Brhel as well as the dynamic, continually morphing duo of Doug Clemons and Matt Frye, both of whom play numerous nasty characters.

Clemons is particularly good embodying those characters whose selfishness turns narcissistically inward; Frye is at his best when inhabiting those characters whose selfishness is aggressively directed outward.

Kelsey Wang rounds out the cast, while also regularly accompanying pianist (and musical director) Adam Baus on flute (at one point, they’re joined by Penick on sax for a klezmer tango).

Yes: I admit I occasionally missed hearing full orchestration (as well as songs Valcq cut to straighten the through line and shorten the run time). But I can’t overstate the advantages of watching this story unfold with just these instruments, bravely playing on while surrounded by the dark, in a production where there’s often only a pinprick of light guiding characters forward.

For all the satiric and sometimes goofy fun baked into “Candide,” it’s also urging us to stay the course, cultivating a garden in which we ourselves might grow even when the world around us is choking with weeds.

While it can be extremely funny, this production of “Candide” is pointedly aware of the dark times in which we live. All the more inspiring, then, to be offered this little piece of Eden, from a company that continually dares us to dream. We may never create the best of all possible worlds. But as Candide sings near journey’s end, we can surely make a better one.

…

The Heart of the Picaresque: Valcq’s production sails much closer to commedia dell’arte than grand opera; its closest analogue among the major “Candide” productions might be the 1973 staging by Hal Prince (with added lyrics by Sondheim and a less politically pointed book by Hugh Wheeler). The 1973 production brought “Candide” back from the dead with a slimmed score, smaller orchestra and often frothy, gag-filled humor reminiscent of Second City (in the TAP production, there’s a priceless gag at President Trump’s expense during the Lisbon sequence that’s as good as anything we saw last year from Alec Baldwin).

But the TAP production isn’t just a romp, either. The musically superior cast Valcq has assembled demands that we take Candide’s struggles seriously (the 1973 production went out of its way to insist that nothing being seen should be taken seriously). What results is true to Bernstein himself; unlike Voltaire, who didn’t have a sentimental bone in his body, Bernstein
couldn’t help but inject heart in everything he wrote. I laughed a ton during this “Candide.” But there were also moments during which it made me cry. That’s Bernstein, and that’s Valcq: Always smart, but never at the expense of emotion.

**Telling Stories:** Voltaire’s ostensible target in “Candide” was Leibniz’s blithely optimistic philosophizing. But his real target was the unholy alliance between the Catholic Church and the French monarchy: the fatalism of the Church instructed people to accept the bad things that happened to them as their inevitable lot, while giving the State the justification it needed to perpetrate unfathomable cruelties. Think of all those noxious preachers insisting September 11 reflected a righteous God’s wrath visited on a sinful America and you get the idea.

In this context, TAP’s barebones story theater presentation doesn’t simply allow this small company to share an otherwise undoable story. Story theater also strikes a blow against fatalistic thinking. Underscoring how fully every world we create is performed into being, story theater insists that we can make something different and better, as proactive agents writing our own history. If Sondheim is right (and he is) when insisting that content dictates form, then story theater is an excellent means of championing Voltaire’s (and Bernstein’s) point: We need not accept the powers-that-be telling us to suck it up because we live in the best of all possible worlds (or the best of all possible countries). We don’t.

Story theater in this production isn’t just philosophically satisfying. As embodied here, it’s also imaginative and well executed. Deepest Amazonia, with homemade birdcalls and zinging insects as well as lush vegetation? Check. A storm-tossed vessel, raging sea and ensuing shipwreck? Check. The cataclysmic Lisbon earthquake? Check. You get the idea.

**Kelsey Wang:** If actors like Clemons and Frye manage to make each one of their many characters distinct – and they do – much of the credit goes to costume designer Kelsey Wang. This is the sixth TAP show I’ve seen for which she has designed costumes that are reliably sharp, often funny and emotionally true to the characters she dresses. The story being told through the contrast between Penick’s wholesomely chipper, lederhosen-wearing Candide and Gamaché’s increasingly bedraggled Cunegonde is a good example. By the time this pair reaches Venice, he looks as though he would like another glass of milk before his next hike. She looks as though she needs another fix before her next hook-up.

There’s more: As noted above, Wang also acts and sings, inhabiting several characters here. And to complete her customized version of the triple threat, she plays flute, adding a lyrical counterpoint to Baus’ piano that channels the emergence of Candide’s voice as he journeys toward self-realization.

**“Make Our Garden Grow”:** The crusty Voltaire would roll in his grave if he got wind of this Finale, in which Candide’s irrepressible optimism asserts itself yet again while he determinedly joins with those around him in singing of the garden they’ll grow together.

Too bad for Voltaire: to invoke the title to another “Candide” song, Voltaire’s dead, you know. But nothing can kill Bernstein’s soaring final homage to hope, through which Candide is joined by an ensemble that sings on even after the accompanying music falls away; continuing a
cappella, they forge a community and place their faith in the future, despite the nightmare of history and exceptionally long odds.

No matter how often I hear it, these final moments of “Candide” grab and shake me. That disclosure duly made, I can’t recall ever having been as moved as I was when hearing the Finale this past weekend, in this small theater on the edge of Wisconsin, as sung by a remarkably talented and plucky cast that passionately believes it can make the impossible come true. Make no mistake: There’s something both impossible and slightly crazy about daring to stage such a difficult piece in this space, on TAP’s budget. But stage it Valcq and his cast have, in ways that challenge us to see the familiar anew. That’s what good art does. That’s what optimism is, in both the best of all possible worlds and in our fallen one.