

Critics' Forum
Theater
Shifting Moods Mark "Time"
By Aram Kouyoumdjian



[Anna Khaja as Kitty and Michael Franco as Joe in "The Time of Your Life.]

A harsh reality of theater is that monumental works of drama—say, those with epic-sized casts or taxing technical demands—are rarely produced. The limiting factor is economic: theaters either lack the resources to undertake such productions or simply cannot afford them.

Few plays illustrate this harsh reality as well as William Saroyan's "The Time of Your Life." The foremost Armenian-American playwright's Pulitzer Prize-winning masterwork boasts a script rich with lyricism. But it requires nearly two dozen actors, which renders it practically untouchable.

To my knowledge, the play has not been professionally staged since an exquisite 2002 production by the Steppenwolf Theatre Company in Chicago. (Rather than mounting its own production, the Seattle Repertory Company simply imported the Steppenwolf show in 2004, as did the American Conservatory Theater in San Francisco).

So the mere fact that the Open Fist Theatre Company is presenting "The Time of Your Life" in Hollywood (through July 1) is welcome news. That this esteemed troupe acquits itself with an impressive production doubles the delight.

Set in San Francisco at the outset of World War II, "The Time of Your Life" traces the bustle at Nick's Pacific Street Saloon. It revolves, in part, around Joe, a wealthy dreamer and a regular at the bar, where he endlessly sips champagne and soaks up the atmosphere of the diverse characters who drift in and out of the joint. Saroyan crafts a gorgeous mosaic of humanity flowing through the saloon, which makes "The Time of Your Life"

more of a lovely mood piece—funny, heartbreaking, and redemptive—rather than a strictly plot-driven narrative.

The denizens of Nick's watering hole include longshoremen, prostitutes, corrupt cops, a starving piano player, a pinball addict, a philosophizing immigrant, and that indelible teller of tall tales, Kit Carson. Even as these eccentrics struggle with life's hardships, they cling, in true Saroyan style, to innocence and hope in their search for a better, decent life; for work; or for someone to love.

The play's nominal love story involves Joe's underling, Tom, and Kitty Duvall, the prostitute he seeks to save from the streets. Its best love scene, however, comes as a brief, poetic, altogether surreal encounter between Joe and Mary, a married woman who strolls into the bar. In their few minutes together (we never see Mary again), Joe declares his love for her. Although unable to welcome his love, Mary admits to being happy with the thought that Joe will pine for her after she's gone from his life. The scene's simple beauty lies in its depiction of a world where people cross paths as in a dream, where love is instantly felt and confessed, where longings forever linger in memory.

For the Steppenwolf production in Chicago, director Tina Landau had heightened the dream-like quality of Saroyan's play through a fluid, stylized manner of movement, at times in rhythm with impeccable musical choices that punctuated the production and underscored its transcendent closing tableau.

The Open Fist production—probably funded with only a fraction of the Steppenwolf budget—cannot match the visual flair of Landau's panoramic staging, which had elevated background action to high art. Nevertheless, as directed by Stefan Novinski, the production is an accomplished one, sensitive to the shifting moods of Saroyan's script. Although he allows the pace to slacken at times, Novinski deftly handles the challenges of the play's sprawling storylines. He elicits fine performances from a talented cast, including Michael Franco, who ably captures the duality of Joe's buoyancy and bitterness, and Bruce A. Dickinson, who nails the deadpan hilarity of Kit Carson. The period set designed by Donna Marquet creates an authentic milieu for the action.

While the opportunity to experience an infrequently revived Saroyan play may be reason enough to see "The Time of Your Life," it's the charmed combination of strong acting and intelligent direction that makes this Open Fist production a rare treat indeed.

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