

Where the wild thoughts are: in the theater, it's all political

Private and public matters in Fugard, 'Falstaff' and the BodyVox follies

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When you walk into the theater for a night out, do you leave your politics at the door? Or do you expect to see the big issues of the day reflected on the stage?

After a busy run that included the opening of the second part of BodyVox's 15-year dance retrospective on Thursday night, the opening of Verdi's "Falstaff" at Portland Opera on Friday night, and the opening of Athol Fugard's "My Children! My Africa!" at Profile Theatre on Saturday night, I found myself thinking about how wide the idea of theater stretches, not just as a craft but also as a window on reality – and how pieces of that reality that seem incompatible might fit together, after all.

The Oregonian's excellent critics James McQuillen ("Falstaff") and Marty Hughley ("My Country! My Africa!"), and ArtsWatch's own excellent critic Martha Ullman West (BodyVox), have covered the reviewing bases admirably. Except for a minor quibble here or there, I agree with what they wrote, and I have little to add: For solid takes on each show, read their reviews.

I continue to be astonished, though, by a theatrical world that can pull me in such a short time span from the frolicking optimism of BodyVox to the broad caricature and lyrical bounce of "Falstaff" to the intense and tragic speechifying of Fugard's play, which is set against the Township revolts of the 1980s in South Africa, before the fall of apartheid in 1994. It's a journey that runs (going in reverse) from an intensely political clash that puts to test the very value of art in times of crisis; to a frothy but sly and musically adventurous dip into sexual politics; to an exercise in pure movement that seems to celebrate the joys of private moments and experiences in life.



*Bermea: a teaching moment.
Jamie Bosworth Photographer*

“My Children! My Africa!” – with its fine ensemble of Bobby Bermea as a charismatic black teacher who believes fundamentally in reading and knowledge as the path to freedom; Gilbert Feliciano as his prize student, who is swept into the revolutionary spirit and abandons the classroom to take to the streets; and Chelsie Kinney as an eager white student who’s trying desperately to understand the rifts in both her country and her friends’ once almost father-and-son relationship – is theater with a social mission. As in so many of Fugard’s plays, it’s made up of long and eloquent speeches that dig deep into the realities of racial and social inequalities, and brings to a head the idea that all decisions are both personal and political. Make the wrong decision – or the right one in the wrong circumstances – and you can die. The teacher’s faith in literature and learning as the path to an individual liberty that will lead to social freedom is swept aside in the fever of a potent collective social moment, and the battle between gradualism and revolution has echoes from 1776 to 1789 to 1848 to Prague Spring and Arab Spring. Fugard’s world has tripwires everywhere, and leaves no room for missteps. Here, it’s possible that a person can be right in the long term but fatally wrong in the short term – or vice versa.

If Fugard’s drama is a matter of life and death, the stakes are a little lower in Verdi’s “Falstaff,” an opera based mainly on one of Shakespeare’s lightest plays, “The Merry Wives of Windsor.” Legend has it that the play would never have existed if Queen Elizabeth hadn’t liked the roguish knight so much in the “Henry” plays that she asked Shakespeare to write a new play especially for him. So there, if you like, is a political underpinning, though not a heavy one. Theater people sometimes treat “Merry Wives” as an almost embarrassing trifle, but I have a soft spot for it, and I think it’s shrewder than people often give it credit. Verdi and his librettist, Arrigo Boito, understood the shrewdness, and the result is an intensely theatrical musical comedy with swift movement, delicious music, sparkling characters, and some terrific stage moments (cue the laundry being dumped into the river below, accompanied by outraged shout from tumbling fat knight). Portland Opera’s production, as McQuillen writes, is truly splendid.

The beauty of the play and opera is that everyone knows Falstaff’s an angler and a cheat, and that his protestations of love to the Mistresses Page and Ford are merely efforts to improve his tenuous economic position. His outrageousness is also his charm, and no one wants to see him seriously injured: they just want to see him foiled and contained. Shakespeare wrote a lot about the role of women in society, not always with a fully modern sensibility but generally with a much more progressive view than was common in his time. In a way this play anticipates the sexual politics of Jane Austen’s world, which was so intensely aware of the links among financial stability, personal freedom, and mutual respect between the sexes. The women of “Merry Wives” are like Kate in “The Taming of the Shrew,” but empowered by their own, independent resources. And Falstaff is funny because he’s the past, no longer really relevant. That’s political.

All right, then. But what about this fresh and invigorating, optimistic world of BodyVox, a place that bubbles over with the joy of movement and the sheer fun of American quirkiness? As Ullman West notes in her review, “(t)he company aesthetic is determinedly apolitical and non-polemic.” Surely this is escapism, if of a relatively high and sophisticated level.

I call to the witness stand the Nobel-winning novelist Mario Vargas Llosa, a man at once steeped in politics – he failed in a 1990 run for the presidency of Peru – and deeply suspicious of it as a repressive force against the freedom of the individual. Vargas Llosa is a little controversial because over the years his political views have shifted from left toward a more libertarian outlook, putting him in company with such other notable and politically engaged writers as David Mamet and Tom Stoppard. He defends his views eloquently, and like Stoppard, sometimes in ways that reveal the inadequacies of our common understandings of the political spectrum. “I strongly believe in the individual’s sovereignty,” Vargas Llosa told the New York Times in a 1990 interview following publication of his erotically charged novel “In Praise of the Stepmother,” scant months after his defeat at the polls. “But the fact is that it is not only collectivist or statist ideologies but also the very democracies and modern societies that we defend which have been eroding and limiting the individual. Well, eroticism is inseparably individualistic. It has its own moral justification because it says that pleasure is enough for me. It is a statement of the individual’s sovereignty.”

BodyVox’s work isn’t primarily erotic, although, as with most dance companies, touches of light eroticism aren’t unknown in its repertoire, either. But BodyVox’s dances and films tend to be intensely individualistic, exploring the ways people think and dream privately and in small groups. And Vargas Llosa’s argument is that, from one viewpoint at least, the most compelling political act a person can commit is to be entirely personal: only by exercising freedom do you truly have it. It’s tempting to say that the freedom to be nonpolitical needs to be won through overtly political means: the private moments of pleasure that BodyVox celebrates can be made possible only by sweeping political movements like the battle against apartheid that Fugard explores in “My Children! My Africa!” But twist the looking glass just a little and another truth emerges: freedom is the act of simply being as you wish. So when BodyVox’s Jamey Hampton moves, in Ullman West’s words, with “the twist of an eyebrow, the lifting of a knee, the reach of one of his long, eloquent arms,” it’s a personal expression with deep cultural implications, a participation in the right to be.

A successful revolution has to be for something as well as against something, and BodyVox represents the “for” of the American revolution: life, liberty, the pursuit of happiness. And looking at it that way suddenly deepens the implications. Maybe this is why we go to the theater. Because here – inside this darkened space that easily enfolds the relative weights and balances of Fugard, Falstaff, and the BodyVox follies; within this artificial circle created for the commission of little acts of controlled impulse – is where we liberate our minds and spirits. And consciously or not, that’s political. In the theater, you can watch. But you can’t hide.