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Camera's choreography embodied paradoxes. Wendla (Annelise Nielsen) performed a profound dance of binaries, which seemed to be Camera's *modus operandi*: of joy and horror, of innocence and knowledge, of lightness and great weight. In another dance, a schoolboy (Christian Hoots) and the now-come-to-life Desdemona (Linda Tardif) shared an erotic dance full of points of contact and departure. The connection and separation of the two actors in the dance signified the children's need for human connection, sexual connection, and connection to a body of knowledge, as well as their need for separation from their parents, school teachers, and an oppressive society.

Right before the teachers interrogated Melchior, they danced with appropriate accompanying music in a metaphorical circus performed by pompous though twisted mechanical beings. Sharing the mannerisms of toy soldiers, each teacher embodied both innocence, as a toy, and vileness, suggested in quasi-Nazi salutes. The dance was like a game of musical chairs turned upside down: when the music was chaotic but in clear tune, they marched in and out of unison, and when it changed to a giddy and frenetic mess of a tune, they all danced and played like little children. The teachers could not repress the child inside of themselves, even though they were clearly twisted by their power, as their faces were twisted with scorn. The dance was a physical representation of the inner turmoil of children aware of their inevitable transformation into adults like those who came before them.

Soon after Moritz's (Michael Greehan) suicide, he danced with a disembodied model of his head in his hands. This dance metonymically revealed the meaning of the production. Presumably in an afterlife, Moritz was at first discombobulated, not understanding his body. His "head" (that is, the head of his penis, his mind, and literally his physical head) led his body. In making his body move in



Wendla (Annelise Nielsen) in *Spring Awakening*.  
(Photo: Centripetus Theatre Company.)



Moritz (Michael Greehan) dancing with his head in *Spring Awakening*. (Photo: Centripetus Theatre Company.)

beautiful unison with his head, Moritz "discovered" his body through play. Moritz's disembodied head seemed to touch every part of his body throughout the dance (metaphorically, the mind and body were working as one). Finally, Moritz's dejected body language suggested that he realized his and his society's awful predicament; the choreography suggested that death accompanies discovery (once you name a thing you kill it, once you find it you lose it, and so on). In this production's new ending, Moritz offered Melchior his hand to join him and Wendla in death, and the lights went down before the audience could see Melchior's decision. The audience was left contemplating the binaries and paradoxes highlighted in the play's dances.

Bercovici and Camera's production challenged the sexuality-driven reading of Wedekind's play. The audience was confronted with palpable desire. Usually, the desire is sexual; here, however, it was the desire to ease the tension between progress and regression. The audience ultimately left the theatre both with a sense of childlike wonder and with the burden of adult responsibility re-instilled.

**MICHAEL Y. BENNETT**

*University of Wisconsin-Whitewater*

#### **THE MASTER BUTCHERS SINGING CLUB.**

By Marsha Norman, from the novel by Louise Erdrich. Directed by Francesca Zambello. Guthrie Theatre, Wurtele Thrust Stage, Minneapolis. 25 September 2010.

"It would seem that there had been a great collision, that two glaciers had through slow force smashed together, at last, and buckled." This elegant



Lee Mark Nelson (Fidelis Waldvogel) and Emily Gunyou Halaas (Delphine Watzka) in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. (Photo: Michal Daniel.)

phrase summarizes the long-anticipated romantic union between master butcher Fidelis Waldvogel and his acrobat-turned-housekeeper Delphine Watzka in the Guthrie Theatre's world premiere of *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. The metaphor of collision also aptly expressed theatrical tensions lingering throughout Marsha Norman's adaptation of Louise Erdrich's acclaimed novel. The Guthrie's production merged cultural customs of German immigrants on the North Dakota prairie with Native American stylistic sensibilities. This attempted cultural fusion achieved mixed results: when it worked, the production soared with narrative authenticity and engaging cultural juxtaposition, but when the fusion failed, *Master Butchers* sank under the weight of disappointing characterization exacerbated by a muddled and sprawling script.

Unlike much of her biographically influenced fiction, Erdrich hung the majority of the narrative of *Master Butchers* on the German American branches of her biracial family tree. German immigrant and World War I veteran Fidelis, robustly played by Lee Mark Nelson, stepped off of the train in Argus, North Dakota, not knowing a soul. (He wanted to ride to Seattle, but he only had enough money to make it halfway there.) David Korins's vast scene design—comprised of open space and rolling units evocative of railway cars—aided the sense of physical and cultural isolation. While in Argus, Fidelis raised a family, dealt with personal tragedy, and eventually fell in love with the fetching Delphine. This immigrant tale forms the core of Erdrich's story.

Norman's adaptation strived to flesh out existing Native American elements within Erdrich's novel. An impressive example of this successful cultural

positioning came through the playwright's inventive choice to make the relatively minor Native American character of Step and a Half the primary narrator of the play. A member of the Menominee and Stockbridge-Munsee tribes, veteran actor Sheila Tousey turned Step and a Half into a clever and wise storyteller who anchored the play with shamanistic authority. Tousey's Step and a Half made a fine narrator for other reasons as well. Her status as a colorful and mysterious rag-picker haunting the borders of Argus imbued her stories with a magical sense of omniscience. The all-knowing outsider quality of this watcher and observer of Erdrich's fictional town resulted in some playful humor. For example, during one encounter with the enigmatic Step and a Half, a frustrated Delphine shouted, "Who the hell are you anyway!"

The musical elements of *Master Butchers* further accentuated the clash of cultures. Homesick for the motherland, the industrious Fidelis eventually starts a singing club in his Argus butcher shop. Director Francesca Zambello's production wisely took advantage of the theatrical potential of this musical element of Erdrich's novel. A mixture of German hymns and folksongs, nostalgically sung by the male chorus of townspeople, wove throughout the show. At intermission, I overheard an elderly audience member beam: "My grandmother used to sing me that tune, but in German."

As beautiful as they were, the singing club's choral arrangements shared the sound design with a markedly different musical style. Starting with the drama's opening moments, haunting flute music, performed by M. Cochise Anderson, scored Step and a Half's poetic narration and many of the play's episodic transitions. The program listed Anderson, a Twin Cities-based musician and spoken-word artist, as "Ancestor/Traditional Native Music." Predictably, his hovering, willowy flute riffs, played live and in view of the audience, clashed stylistically with Fidelis's boisterous European choir. Such competing musical sensibilities prevented Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen's sound design from achieving artistic unity; indeed, the lack of cohesion arguably diminished the visceral impact of both German and Native American musical styles. That said, the disharmony of the overall sound design succeeded in forming an appropriately impure aesthetic. As Erdrich's novels, Norman's adaptation, and U.S. history repeatedly remind us, European immigrants and the indigenous inhabitants of the Great Plains did not often blend either smoothly or harmoniously.

Unfortunately, Zambello and Norman's attempt to navigate the German/Native American cultural clash fell perplexingly into one-key characterization. In the character of Cyprian, Erdrich gifted us with



Emily Gunyou Halaas (Delphine Watzka) and Sheila Tousey (Step and a Half) in *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. (Photo: Michal Daniel.)

one of her most humorous and heartbreaking literary creations: a closeted Native American World War I veteran who tours the Midwest pretending to be Delphine's husband in a vaudevillian balancing-act. While the novel does not conceal Cyprian's Native identity to the reader, the production inexplicably downplayed it to the audience until deep into act 2. Unaided by Charlie Brady's bland performance, Norman's adaptation and Zambello's direction of Cyprian ignored Erdrich's sensitivity to Native wit and ear for Native diction. As a result, the audience mostly missed out on the humor and pathos of a relentlessly poignant character who must endure the double dilemma of being both Native and gay in the early twentieth century. Through narration and sound design, Zambello and Norman crafted bold choices that balanced the immigrant/indigenous dichotomy in Erdrich's story. Stripping Cyprian of his Native identity for most of the show in favor of a bland cultural androgyny was both a perplexingly inconsistent alteration of the novel and a missed theatrical opportunity.

And not all of the disunity of the production directly related to balancing the German/Native tensions within the story. Some of it derived from Norman's noble if doomed attempt to summarize an over 400-page novel in less than three hours. One of several examples of distracting rabbit trails within the show involved Clarisse, the Ado Annie of the production. Played with vim by Tracey Maloney, Clarisse inexplicably humors then brutally murders her transparently sinister rapist, who is also the town sheriff. The cover-up sequence for this unassuming subplot received too much of the drama's already crammed scope, lurching Zambello's pacing away from gentle storytelling toward an unconvincingly imposed whodunit velocity—Agatha Christie on a bad day. Of course, readers can find all of these and other equally esoteric meanders within the novel, but the luxury of narrative time, combined with Erdrich's poetic lyricism, papers over the cracks. Despite Step and a Half's efforts as

narrator, this saving lyricism disappeared in great swatches of the production, replaced by dangling tidbits of mystifying if colorful plodding.

The Guthrie deserves credit for undertaking ambitious productions like *The Master Butchers Singing Club*. A great regional theatre should ideally find space in its season for new voices, marginalized communities, and regional stories. An original play set on the Great Plains adapted from the work of an acclaimed Minnesotan/Native American writer certainly conforms to these aspirations. And several creative and sensitive attempts to highlight clashing cultures within the story served the production well; flourishes of fine acting, lovely imagery, and inventive design produced many delightful moments. If only the promise of the production could have overcome an unfortunate misfire in the depiction of Cyprian, as well as a wandering and unfocused script.

**ROBERT HUBBARD**

*Northwestern College*

**MAJOR BARBARA.** By George Bernard Shaw. Directed by David Frank. American Players Theatre, Up the Hill Theatre, Spring Green, WI. 24 September 2010.

**THE CIRCLE.** By Somerset Maugham. Directed by James Bohnen. American Players Theatre, Up the Hill Theatre, Spring Green, WI. 25 September 2010.

At a time when many theatre companies are struggling to fill seats, American Players Theatre (APT) consistently attracts large, engaged, loyal audiences to provocative, sometimes unknown plays. In programming both Shaw's *Major Barbara* and Maugham's *The Circle* as part of its 2010 season, APT provided an unusual opportunity for its artists and audiences to be challenged by two plays written by authors whose lives overlapped, but whose aesthetics and artistic goals did not. What was it that turned two "wordy" plays devoid of much physical action—one a bit more and one a bit less than a century old—into accessible, exciting, living theatre? The answers help to explain the ongoing success of this Midwestern theatre.

For its 2010 season, APT ran five productions in its outdoor theatre, from June through the first weekend of October, while its indoor theatre housed three plays until mid-October. Also scheduled was a small winter production, as well as other kinds of outreach activities. Although the season's two Shakespeare