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Wings Of Desire

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Bernard White and Mam Smith explore earthbound versus ethereal existence (Source: American Repertory Theatre)

In 1987, Wim Wenders shot a gorgeous film, called **Wings of Desire**, that tracked the slow burn of an angel named Damiel falling in love with the idea of existing as a human being, and, as an extension of this, falling in love with a female trapeze artist. The film, which explores the ages-old division between spirit and body, also served as a commentary on the way Wenders' native Germany had been divided by the Cold War into East and West, with Berlin - the film's setting - a focal point, what with its forbidding wall and its sense of cultural fracture.

In the American Repertory Theatre's new stage version of the film, produced in concert with Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the social critique has been transplanted and updated, so that the action unfolds in Boston of the present day. (One can only surmise that the play's Dutch version included similar political and geographical alterations.) The cultural divides that are spoken of, sometimes in yapping diatribe (even the characters mock themselves, lapsing into jabbering bursts of "Yadda, yadda, yadda!") and sometimes in pointed asides, as in the sporadic recurrences of a news show called Here and Now, are

rooted in America's divided public life. The point is well taken: if, in the film's original trailer, the narrator intoned, "There are angels on the streets of Berlin," well, the bluest district of the bluest state in the Union seems a natural new home for those very same angels in 2006. Gideon Lester and Dirkje Houtman, who adapted the play from the screenplay Wenders wrote with poet Peter Handke, have some fun with the process of translating the movie into contemporary terms, and director Ola Mafaalani does, too: at one point Cassiel, usually so gentle about calming the desperate, simply grabs one enraged man by the back of the neck to interrupt his sputtering tirade.

But the political message is less important, and less the production's focus, than the human desire to live richly - live, if at possible, doubly, enjoying both the fruits of the coolly assessing intellect and of the hot, rambunctious animal passions. Indeed, as the program notes point out, Wenders himself described the movie as an essay into the question, "How to live?" As a bystander, clear-headed and removed from tumult? Or as a participant in the human hurly-burly, with its noise, its colors, its woundings, and its pleasures?

The exceptional staging of the play finds inspiration from the central notion of spirit-versus-matter from the very start: columns of sand trickle down from above, lit by spotlights on the floor that make the trickles look like coruscating shafts of otherworldly vapor. These downpours represent a river of light that can be crossed by a human being on his way to angeldom, or the exact opposite, an angel forsaking immortal life to jump into the risks and rewards of human existence. But they also stand in as a reminder of the brevity of human life: uncontained by any hourglass, these are also the sands of time.

As in the film, the play begins with Damiel (Bernard White) and Cassiel (Mark Rosenthal) swapping tales of the events they have witnessed. A pair of recording angels, they flip through their black notebooks and read aloud the highlights of the day. For Cassiel, this includes the time of sunrise and sunset, and random acts of human folly: a prisoner screaming out and then charging head-first into a wall, for example. But for Damiel, the noteworthy events are concerned with sensation: a woman folds up her umbrella and allows the rain to soak her: this captures his imagination and spurs his yearning to live as human beings do, trapped in time but also delighted by their physical bodies. "It would be something," Damiel reckons, "to be stimulated, not just spiritually, but by a meal, a line of a neck, an ear..." This angel has watched humanity throughout the entirety of history, and through his gaze both love and envy for mortals, and mortal existence, has entered his heart.

For humanity, of course, there's a somewhat different perspective. Marion (Mam Smith), a young trapeze artist, spends her time aloft with the help of ropes and rigging. "What happens when time itself is the disease?" she sighs, on her last night with the circus, her last chance to soar. Gravity is no concern for angels - hence the popular image of them as having wings - but time and gravity conspire to drag even the loveliest human flesh down, to weariness and decrepitude. Marion's dreams lie in a realm beyond the human world - even as Damiel, invisible to her, takes an interest in her performance, and in her mortal beauty.

In the film, Peter Faulk played himself as a former angel who has "entered the stream" of time and of phenomenal (as opposed to ideal) existence; in this case we get Stephen Payne, who fills the same role. Chuckling, winking, speaking to the audience and to the invisible angels by turns, Payne's character (in a meta-story twist, he's playing an ART actor named Stephen) seems drunk - though on spirits, or on Spirit, or on the natural high of living in a human frame, it's hard to tell. "Life: I'd miss it if I didn't have it, said the general to the whore, said the whore to the general," is his refrain. Payne is engaging, exuberant, and - unlike the other actors, whose performances often feel boxed in and simplified, or at least amplified into basic sketches of their characters - he projects a persona layered with strata of regret, excitement, uncertainty, and pluck. He's no longer sure of what he's doing, and his view now, though at the "eye level" that Damiel romanticizes, is also hemmed in by the constraints of human life - but he's far too interested in what new color or shape is coming at him to worry about it. Producing a guitar, Payne declares that he has little idea (other than loud) how to play the instrument; he plucked it from a dumpster in New York, and its shapely physical contours made it just too magical to discard. He introduces himself with simple, jovial directness: "Am I the only person who doesn't know what the hell is going on?!"

He's got a good point there, and it's wise of the play to acknowledge it up front. Where the movie spent a good deal of time from the angelic point of view - shot in black and white, the better to shock the viewer with the sudden pleasure of introducing the full-color human experience - the play tends to relegate the angels to the status of secondary characters, shadowing and sometimes mimicking the human beings they watch over. The play, in other words, spends much of its time in the human realm, and makes it plain that's where it's at by including lots of loud music and energetic tomfoolery. That's not to say that the stage version abandons the long, steady gaze of the movie entirely; Mam Smith is given several minutes' time aloft to twirl and wind, ravel and unravel in her harness of white cloth, putting on a breathtaking display of acrobatic prowess; later on, when Damiel claims human form, the young woman and the ageless angel catch sight of one another, stop, and stare for a long, long moment - Damiel, tellingly, with an apple in his hand.

There are other meditative touches, as well. Homer (Frieda Pittoors), the immortal bard, is a sort of human oracle - a deathless storyteller who does not, as the angels do, simply observe humanity, but who entertains and instructs the generations of humankind with stories. Cases in point: The Iliad and The Odyssey. The angels, beings without imagination (they first learned speech by imitating humans, and the first human word, Damiel and Cassiel recall, was a guttural noise rising from the belly of a newly created beast called Man), merely record facts; Homer sings of possibility and of

heartfelt meanings, though even she is perplexed by the limitations of creativity. "No one has yet managed to sing a saga of peace," she despairs, and though her monologues are accompanied by a serene light that glows over the heads of the audience (in compelling contrast to the harsh and greenish glare from the set's mock-up of a snack vendor's trailer, or the blinding, hostile floodlamp that hovers over the TV newsreader Robin Young's desk), it's clear that Homer's ability to sustain the interest of the human creature is coming to an end, her capacity to illuminate fizzling out.

What will take its place? Chaos, racket, new forms of expression - some of them nasty and destructive, but some bound to be honed into fresh forms of art. The set's scattering of chairs and growing heaps of sand speak to just such chaos, and the characters romp about from time to time, playing in the sand, kicking it and shoveling it up, and spilling the chairs around with glee; but there's still a need and a talent, incipient in the human soul, to take to the rigging and learn to fly.

"When the child was a child," the play's narration begins, and is repeated later on in a hard-driving thrashfest of a song (one of several musical pieces performed by Jesse Lenat and Hadewych Minis), "then was the time for questions: why am I here and not there? Why am I myself, and not you?" The angels have the same innocence and the same essential curiosity: the human beings are rougher, children in the sense of their immaturity and violence. Of course, former angel and human being come together to create, not human offspring, but "an image." Perhaps, we might think, the image of God - or at least of some happy completion that gives wings to human passion.

American Repertory Theatre, 65 Brattle Street, Cambridge. Performances run November 25 - December 17. Ticket prices: Friday and Saturday evenings, \$76 / \$53 (depending on seating); Saturday and Sunday matinees and evening performances on Sundays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays, \$66 / \$38. Tickets available online at <http://www.amrep.org/wings/index.html#tickets> or by calling 617-547-8300.



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