



Mam Smith (right) astonishes as the circus trapeze artist whose beauty draws the angel Daniel to earth. (Andre Constantini)

STAGE REVIEW

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Taking to the air The American Repertory Theatre stages an uplifting 'Wings of Desire'

By Louise Kennedy, Globe Staff | December 1, 2006

CAMBRIDGE -- Is it sand? Dust? Fog? Ash? Steam?

"Wings of Desire" opens in mystery, in darkness pierced by a flash of light. An angel sits, listening, flanked by columns of -- yes, it *is* sand, streaming down in radiant beams. Then darkness again.

And then such light, such beauty, such air and life and time and timelessness as theater can, but too rarely does, bestow. "Wings of Desire" is a stage adaptation of the 1987 Wim Wenders film, it's true. But it is a purely theatrical experience.

The outlines of the story remain unchanged. Two angels, Daniel and Cassiel, watch over humanity from above until Daniel acts on his simple, irresistible desire: to become human himself. But the stage version, a joint production by the American Repertory Theatre and Toneelgroep Amsterdam, at once honors the spirit of the film and transmutes it into something else entirely.

So it helps to be familiar with the film, but it also helps not to cling too tightly to the memory of it. Gideon Lester and Dirkje Houtman have created a spare adaptation of the poetic script, and director Ola Mafaalani has used it to present her own reflection on Wenders's themes: the precious brevity of human life, the endlessness of eternity, and the inexorable power of love.

Because she is working on the stage instead of film, however, this version also becomes a rich, subtle, and deeply moving -- if sometimes slow-moving -- exploration of the relationship between actor and audience and of the human connections that are forged by sharing in a communal experience of art.

What is lost here is the concrete specificity of Wenders's original setting. His "Wings" is, as much as anything, a love song to Berlin -- and to a Berlin now vanished, since the fall of the Wall. This production makes no attempt to create Berlin onstage; indeed, Andre Joosten's set is nearly bare but for a food cart. And the script throws in many references to both Boston and Amsterdam, sometimes clumsily.

As a result, we feel less grounded in a single place. But we also feel more clearly the resonance of Wenders's thoughts about division and unification, about the borders between people and between nations. The multinational cast, which presented a Dutch version in Amsterdam before the premiere here, also deepens this awareness of barriers to be crossed.

Ah, yes, the wonderful cast. Bernard White looks nothing like the monumentally humane Damiel of the film, Bruno Ganz, but his eyes have the same look of bottomless compassion and longing. And his "flight" with aerialist Mam Smith, who repeatedly astonishes as the circus trapeze artist whose beauty draws Damiel to earth, is a stunning embodiment of the intertwined peril and security of giving oneself over to love.

But that's just one of many indelible images from 100 deeply layered minutes. Frieda Pittoors's ancient bard, peering out from the edge of the stage to draw us into her "land of story"; young Andris Freimanis skateboarding with the joyous abandon of childhood that Damiel celebrates in one monologue; Boston's own Robin Young, reading both Rilke and the news.

That juxtaposition gives some idea of the mix here: timeless art and minute-to-minute reality. The art ranges from quiet poetry to loud -- occasionally *too* loud -- rock riffs. The reality, as Damiel's fascination with it homes in on the weighty specificity of an apple or the heat of a steaming coffee, becomes at once more mundane and more transcendent than we usually experience.

And the sand. It streams down, a little or a lot at once; it piles up, drifts, catches the light or blocks it, evokes an hourglass or an imploding tower without ever forcing either image. It is a character onstage, and a wonderfully complex and meaningful one. When, at the climactic moment of descent into human life, Cassiel holds Damiel under its stream, the sand rushes over his head: a baptism, an embalming, a caul, a shroud.

In that moment, we feel his humanity in all its mortal glory. And so, blessedly, we feel ours, too.

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