



Aurora Stages Safran Foer's "Everything Is Illuminated"

BY JEAN SCHIFFMAN

Aurora Theatre Company's Tom Ross rises to the challenge of directing a play with two simultaneous narratives.

To stage American writer Jonathan Safran Foer's first novel, "Everything Is Illuminated," presents certain artistic challenges. A few weeks prior to rehearsals for the West Coast premiere of British playwright Simon Block's adaptation of the novel, Aurora Theatre Company's Tom Ross is clearly eager for those challenges. Of the 30 plays he's directed previously for the beloved downtown Berkeley theater, founded 27 years ago by the late Barbara Oliver and colleagues, many have been set in living rooms, bedrooms and offices. This one is entirely different.

For one thing, there are two simultaneous narratives. One is the quest of the so-called hero, a writer slyly named Jonathan Safran Foer, to trace his roots in Ukraine from 1791 to World War II—specifically, to find the woman whom he believes saved his grandfather from the Nazis (and therefore is responsible for his own existence), and also to find his grandfather's shtetl, which was obliterated during the war. The other is the description and interpretation of that quest by Jonathan's Ukrainian translator and guide, Alex, with his comically fractured English and deep secrets.

Other challenges in bringing the novel to theatrical life in a small theater: the multiple characters, including a magical girl, her adoptive father and a demented dog named Sammy Davis Jr., Jr.; the logistics of a road trip through Ukraine (including a house in the woods, dining rooms, a train station, a hotel); the nonlinear time span across centuries; and an element of magical realism. All the principals, including the dog (represented here as an invisible creature) are multifaceted.

"I think of it as a dark fairy tale," says Ross, who was initially inspired by reading reviews of the play from previous productions (it premiered in London in 2006). He then read the script and the novel, which was published in 2002, listened to the audio version read by two actors ("a revelation!") and watched the 2005 movie in which Elijah Wood played Jonathan.

The story is indeed a mix of the abstract, the absurd, the deeply disturbing and the ethereal. The adventures of Jonathan (played by Jeremy Kahn) and his seeming opposite, Alex (Adam Burch), include Alex's cantankerous grandfather (Julian Lopez-Morillas), who professes to be both blind and deaf but is their driver on their odyssey, and a mysterious old lady in the woods (Lura Dolas) who

may or may not be the rescuer whom Jonathan seeks. An assortment of others, including the legendary girl, are all played by Marissa Keltie.

Kahn says the weird story by Foer (who also wrote “Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close” and other books) creeps up on you rapidly in the necessarily streamlined adaptation: It marries raw theatrical gestures with essential truths, he points out, shifting from the history of the shtetl to the intimacy of two guys in a car. Reading the novel gave him a deeper understanding of Jonathan’s anxieties and vulnerabilities.

Kahn’s own grandfather was not a Holocaust survivor—he served in the Pacific during the war and published a memoir about it—but for Kahn, taking on the role of Jonathan is an opportunity to revisit his own Jewish roots. (Ross, who wanted a Jewish actor for the role, says, “I’ve loved Jeremy forever; he’s very, very funny.”)

In the novel and the play, Jonathan is often referred to by other characters, including Alex and his grandfather, as “the Jew.” “I’m sure that will be painful at first,” acknowledges Kahn. When Ross auditioned for the part of Alex, he told the actors, “Alex has never met a Jew. He’s very open about that.” The character is charmingly clueless, which offsets the discomfort that Jonathan the character, Kahn the actor—and perhaps the audience, too—experience.

Ross knew he wanted Lopez-Morillas to play the stern and angry grandfather; the actor had played a similarly brusque character, the father in Harold Pinter’s “The Homecoming,” under Ross’ direction at Aurora years ago. Says Lopez-Morillas, of Alex’s deeply troubled, even unfathomable grandfather, “I’m interested in complicated characters.”

The play, Lopez-Morillas points out, is in fact in some ways a play about the art of translation, which makes the issue of dialect an especially acute challenge. “I’m the kind of actor who sees every role as a dialect role,” he explains. “What does the character sound like? That’s a core decision.” But in “Everything Is Illuminated,” it’s understood that when we hear Alex and his grandfather talking to each other in perfect English, they’re meant to be speaking in their own native language. When talking to Jonathan, who speaks only English, they at times struggle, hilariously, to communicate.

To present the intricate tale on the Aurora’s stage, which hugs the audience tightly on three sides, Ross conceived the set himself, handing over his suggestions to set designer Kate Boyd: an indigo blue ambiance that recalls Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” but with sunflowers (the official flower of Ukraine) instead of stars.

If the Aurora's stage—constructed specifically for the company, with its actor-centric focus—demands an especially creative approach from designers and directors, it's long been relished by actors. Kahn and Lopez-Morillas both treasure its intimacy. Says Kahn, "It's really exciting; you can feel people staring at the back of your head. It creates the onus to act with every muscle of your body."

This imaginative, funny and horrifying hero's journey is a potent reminder that "Your story does not begin on the day you were born, but with your ancestors," says Ross. "And it doesn't end with your death. [It continues], whether through your kids or your relationships or the contributions you've made to the world."

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Aurora Theatre Company

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