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Festival Fringe Reviews

Part 5: Novecento: Theatre de Quat'Sous, Montreal

The first week of the Edinburgh International Festival began in great dramatic style, with the English language premiere by a Canadian theatre company of an utterly brilliant, contemplative and haunting one-man play, Novecento (Nineteen Hundred). 'Play' is perhaps a misleading term - this is simply a story, the legend of the greatest jazz pianist in the world, narrated over a mesmerising 100 minutes by the actor, Tom McCamus, a solitary figure on the stage.

The title refers not so much to the calendar year but specifically to a man, Danny Boodmann T. D. Lemon, Novecento. He was so named because as a newborn baby he was found abandoned under the grand piano, in the first class lounge of an Cruise ship in a T.D. Lemon box, at the dawn of the 20th century by one of the crew, Danny Boodmann.

Set in the 1930s, Novecento's story is told in a series of evocative flashbacks by his great friend and fellow musician, the trumpet player in the jazz band on board the Virginian. As the audience enter the auditorium, we are met by a swirling mist of steam for we have entered the boiler room of the great ship. We hear the beating rhythmical sound of the engine and slowly make out a hunched figure, cloaked in a thick overcoat and Homburg hat as a fan of light penetrates the iron grill flooring beneath him. A mountain of dusty coal is heaped behind him, and towering above are the huge metal plates and pipes, fixed in place with giant rivets. The whine and moan of the engine, the hiss of steam slowly subside and the trumpet player begins his story.

We hear how Novecento was found on the SS Virginian, named and cared for. It is believed his parents were immigrants, fleeing to America from Europe, too poor to feed another child as they make their long journey to find work and freedom. The boy is brought up on the ship, criss-crossing the Atlantic from Liverpool to New York, Boston to South America, Lisbon to Liverpool, back and forth, year after year. Without birth certificate or passport, and never setting foot on land, Novecento knows only the life on the ocean wave, the ship is his universe and at its centre is a piano. In a world of his own, following the rhythms of the rolling sea, he learns the magical and emotional power of music. When he is just eight years old his adoptive father, Danny Boodmann senior, dies; he sits down at the keyboard and plays in a way "to make angels and first class passengers weep."



Novecento is in his late twenties by the time he meets our storyteller. Never having set foot on dry land he is obviously a man literally "all at sea", geographically removed from the world and from society. He approaches and views life from a rather different angle and music is very much a creative influence in how he is able to express himself.

Key moments in their friendship on the ship are narrated with a perfect sense of pace, eloquence and dramatic vision. There is the scene when Novecento decides at long last that he will go ashore at the next port of call. He is not so interested in stepping ashore but to see the ocean, to stand closely beside the sea.

He borrows the trumpet player's coat and begins to descend the ladder. His slow, uncertain steps are matched by the narrator's soft, measured pace, the picture so perfectly described that you can see Novecento standing there, pausing on the second step, frozen, perhaps terrified of leaving the sanctuary of the

ship.

Another scene brilliantly and vividly evoked is the night of the storm, when Novecento is inspired by the pounding of the waves and rain. The sound of the engines begins to roar loudly, flashes of lightening spins around the boiler room as we hear the story of how the two young men release the brakes on the piano legs, and go for a merry go round waltz around the ballroom, while Novecento drowns out the storm through the crescendo of chords on the keyboard.

The climax of the story revolves around the piano duel between Novecento and Jelly Roll Morton, who is a guest pianist on board, claiming to be the "father of Jazz". He is determined to demonstrate his superiority to the musical prodigy he has been introduced to as "the greatest jazz pianist in the world." The contest begins and through sheer suggestion only by word and dramatic timing, we can imagine the two heavyweight Jazz giants taking their turn at the piano as the rhythm and blues melodies echo about the crowded ballroom on the ship.

"The audience drank it all in without moving. Every breath held, every eye glued to the piano, every mouth hanging open, like perfect idiots. They stayed like that, in total silence, in a complete stupor, even after that furious closing blast of chords that made it seem as though he'd a hundred hands, or as though the piano was about to explode any minute."

But the truth is there is no piano on stage, and only the image of Novecento in the mind of the trumpet player who subtly makes us see, hear and believe the legend of the greatest jazz pianist in the world. The SS Virginian is his only world, but it is as real as any city, a global village peopled with a perennial flow of 2,000 passengers - refugees, businessmen, families and wealthy travellers from every culture, creed and nation. And it is through the raw, rich cocktail of jazz Novecento plays by day and night which reflects his endless voyage of discovery - the perennial movement of people, the shifting, changing early 20th century society, and the freedom of America, against the backdrop of the rolling waves.

The director of this magnificent production, is Francois Girard who was inspired by the story from the moment he read the script.

"It is an epic fable of someone who leads a very unusual life. He never

belongs to any land, any nationality or border. He has lived his entire life in the middle of the ocean, witnessing the world, watching and encountering the people on the boat, where he himself is his own culture. His music cuts across ideas of nationhood and plays a universal, unifying role. Through this man who doesn't belong anywhere, the play questions how we see the real world."

Written as a monologue by the Italian novelist and music critic Alessandro Baricco in 1994, it became an immediate success, being revived in many productions over the past decade in Italy. Only when the play was adapted for the cinema in 1998 by Baricco and Giuseppe Tornatore [renowned for his delightful movie, Cinema Paradiso], did the story reach an international audience, with the film, "The Legend of 1900". It stars Tim Roth as Novecento, Pruitt Taylor Vince as the trumpet player and Clarence Williams III as Jelly Roll Morton. The soundtrack by Ennio Morricone won a Golden Globe award for best original score and continues to be a best selling CD.

But the fully dramatised film, complete with music, is one medium, the live stage performance by Tom McCamus is a breathtaking experience: haunting and poetic, both epic and intimate in style, which only proves once again the extraordinary power of imagination of the human voice telling a story in the most enduring oral tradition of entertainment.

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