

**Dave Berry*****Novecento*, by Alessandro Baricco**[Home](#)

The lights slowly brightened to show a ship's hold in half-shadow, empty apart from scattered debris and a single figure sitting on one side of the stage. The PA played throbbing engine sounds of a large ocean liner, and the man told his tale. He began by telling how, as a young trumpet player, he joined the jazz band on an ocean liner and met the pianist Danny Boodmann TD Lemon Novecento. It soon became clear that this was Novecento's story. The narrator explained how Novecento was born on the ship in 1901 and named for the new century (and a box of fruit). By now the soundtrack had changed to womb sounds, so carefully that I didn't notice until the change was complete. These subtle changes in sound and lighting characterised the play, while the single actor, on stage the whole time, described incidents in Novecento's unusual life.

Music was both central and marginal to this tale. Novecento learned to play the grand piano in the ship's ballroom, becoming the most remarkable player in the world, but never leaving the ship. In one fantastical scene he wins a musical "duel" with Jelly Roll Morton. In another, he steers the piano around the ballroom during a storm simply by the power of his playing. But the true centre was the questions around Novecento himself, and why he never leaves the ship, choosing to stay even when the ship is destroyed. And of course we don't get to hear his music, because that would be impossible. Instead, single notes are deftly woven into the soundtrack, giving the impression of many more filling the air.

This mesmerising show was more grown-up story telling than traditional play. The raconteur barely moved from his place, and the scenery was mostly evocative rather than actual. Only at the climax did the actor act out the scene and the scenery match the action. But however you classify the show, it was inescapably pure theatre. Tom McManus gave a superb performance, while the lighting and sound were astonishingly atmospheric. The director, François Girard, had previously directed the films *The Red Violin* and *Thirty Two Short Films about Glenn Gould*, and it may be that this experience helped to shape his stage direction here.

But while it worked as theatre, I felt it had nothing to say about music. Novecento's music is entirely a romantic myth, from the natural, untaught, genius of the musician to the omission of any mention of musical structure. The play used music as a symbol, and hardly an original symbol at that. Here and elsewhere, the play fell between myth making and realism.

Novecento was clearly not a realistic character, yet it wasn't clear what the mythical aspect was trying to say. His reason for remaining on his transatlantic liner was that compared to the restricted range of

his piano, he was infinite, but next to the vastness of America he was all too small. At face value, this simply says that it's better to be a big fish in a small pond, which hardly merits the profundity implied by the production. Perhaps Baricco was attempting to create a European counter to the myth of the American frontier, or an allegory about the multiple trans-Atlantic links that influence both cultures. More likely is that he was contrasting the self-absorption of the creative process against the calls of the wider world - but that's another romantic fable.

The character of Novecento was weakened by the lack of realism; conversely, the fabulous side of the tale failed to illuminate the myths we choose to live by. We saw a wonderfully evocative production of a fantastic story, but the story had no relevance to real people, real music, or real societies.

Performed by Théâtre De Quat'sous, Montreal