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Loving Repeating



Start by describing one person in every possible way. Then every pair of possible human beings, then every type of three persons in concert. Describe then a crowd of people, then more than a crowd, a world itself. The life of Gertrude Stein started with her self-examination. Then she met Alice B. Toklas, and from the base of their relationship of two soon her name would spread far and wide to every genius in the active world. To show the relationship of such an examining person to the world is necessarily incomplete, but to even try to give the public even a glimpse into her life involves accepting the act of expression in her own terms.

"Loving Repeating," produced by caryn desai for International City Theatre, is a courageous look at an enigmatic but noncompromising figure, using Stein's own text to narrate her life in spirit rather than in facts, a musical setting Stein's repetitive nuances to beautiful melodies.

Gertrude Stein (Cheryl David; Shannon Warne) was an American writer living France who most wanted to understand how to get at the reality of things. She is known for her patronage of artists like Picasso and writers like Hemingway. She studied with psychologist William James, inheriting from him the passion to understand the self and the world. She met her lifelong companion Alice B. Toklas (Melissa Lyons Caldretti) her first day in Paris, and they were devoted to each other until her death from cancer during the second world war.

Such an avant-garde topic as Stein would seem to demand some eclectic and novel music, but the score is your traditional block-buster musical revue. Songs like "A History of One" play like biopics, as tuneful as "Backward in High Heels," the recent musical about Ginger Rogers. However, there are also innovative elements. In the song "My Wife Is My Life," we get to the core of what "Loving Repeating" means. The song is sung alternately by Gertrude and Alice to express the idea that the two women are living together like man and wife. Warne and Caldretti play off each other perfectly, and as they grow together in life, their appearances and outlook are reflected in the musical. The song is a simple repetition of the title, but by presenting the Stein text in this way ("my life is my wife is my life is my wife is my life ..."), we understand the rhythms in her writings much more, and the truth of the assertion comes through just as Stein tells us in how to get at the true idea of things like Chaucer and Shakespear ("a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose"). It's as Stein expresses in the musical, "even after thousands of poems, the moon, sea, and love are really there."

Two musicals within the musical reaffirm the concept of seeking knowledge by repetition. In "A Lyric Opera Made by Two to be Sung," acts are followed by another that has the same crazy story that tells little of anything except Alice and Gertrude being in love. Perhaps a take on Virgil Thompson's opera "Four Saints in Three Acts," the opera is enlivened by the talents of Leland Burnett, Jay Donnell, and Tyler Milliron, who play the various men in the musical who contrast the absolute idealism of Alice and Gertrude with earthly emotion and humor. Similar nonsense rules over the "As a Wife Has a Cow: A Love Story." The music is traditional, but the theme and topic are reflective of the personality of Stein: in a word, deep.

Stein got so much publicity apparently by having such a small crowd, and this musical is reflective of that. The cast is small, and the sets minimalist. The white-branched trees build up to form a beautiful

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heart shape, but for the most part, the action takes place as words. On the other hand, while Stein may have described her work as "one long gay book," the musical is short and sweet. Beginning and ending with a song about a bee getting back to its honeysuckle, the work starts and finishes as if a capsule.

This is no musical for the casual theatre goer. The lack of plot and traditional musical numbers can drive expectations away. The hummable music may keep those audiences' attention, but it's the expression of deeper ideas of being a human and of loving that makes this work something special. As Stein herself wrote when confronted by her own question "what is the answer?," in this musical shows that the collection of facts does not a person make, and truly what is important is "what is the question?"

"Loving Repeating" is performed at International City Theatre in Long Beach, California, until 13th of February, 2010.