

Lethal Lips, Tempting Tongues

"Rappaccini's Daughter" - Laura Schandelmeier

Dance Place - Washington, DC

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by George Jackson

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Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story, "Rappaccini's Daughter", has been made into a movement play that is both beautiful and a bit befuddling. The choreographic dramatization is by Laura Schandelmeier in collaboration with Stephen Clapp, and these two are also the principal motion actors. Ms. Schandelmeier plays the title role's dual aspects convincingly. As innocent victim she is all pastel delicacy, as deadly temptress she shows demonic strength and it is not merely a matter of alternating two characters like Jekyll and Hyde. They must be blended in different proportions for this woman learns that to kiss a man is to kill him, yet she desperately wants that kiss. Mr. Clapp, a lithe mover with an exotically etched silhouette and long black warrior hair, plays two roles, I think. He seems to alternate as Rappaccini, the Dr. Frankenstein of this tale who has turned his own daughter into the monstrous temptress, and as the young hero who, in trying to lift the evil doctor's spell, becomes obsessed with the daughter. A third cast member is an articulated mannequin who also represents the hero or, perhaps, his alter ego.

That much seemed fairly clear. There were murky passages, but I'll get to those later. Body action, reaction, urges, conflicting drives, facial expression and even choreography for the characters' tongues conveyed the story. This movement was highly functional as a vehicle for broad narrative and, atop this efficiency, it had sensual luster, dynamic variety and at times a dancey lilt. The staging was handsome (lighting by Catherine Eliot, mannequin and costuming by Eleanor Rufty, sets by Tim DeVoe and Christopher Reed, and smoke by anonymous). Moreover, the ambience was in keeping with the suggestive and realistic conventions of the work's 19th Century Gothic source. As musical environment, the churchly chanting and ghostly wailing of Toby Twining's "Chrysalid Requiem" sounded tailor made. There were, too, dramatic instances of silence punctuated by performer generated sound.

Admirably, narrative was kept primary and meanings were hinted at lightly. The thoughts that crossed ones mind were theological (Rappaccini as God, the ultimate evil) and arts historical (Rappaccini reminds one of Rothbart, Klingsor, Dracula, also Coppeliuss et al. and his daughter of their instrumental victims). At least two implied topics are current (AIDS, gender politics). These ideas shifted as easily as cloud pictures and yet gave the story's inherent sensuality, sexuality and suspense an added charge.

Unclear were passages of detailed action in which the specifics were puzzling, unless perchance one remembered ones Hawthorne. I'd read the story long ago yet seeing this staging didn't bring back sufficient memories to decipher all the doings. These scenes became tedious and made the hour seem a long one. Information that was part of the press kit but not the printed program mentions that the story is told from the viewpoint of the daughter, Beatrice. That everything is seen from this character's perspective didn't come across at all. Nor—given so many particular pourings of liquids, strewings of petals, fondlings of dolls—did the concept that this was supposed to be an "abstract" narrative. The scene in which Giovanni, the hero in the flesh, encounters his mannequin self and stands stock still is quite poignant for an instant, but then one wants to know not everything but more. Achieving the perfect balance between depiction and suggestion in motion narrative is difficult but not impossible. Not long ago, Paata and Irina Tsikurishvili did it with their "The Silent Hamlet". Laura Schandelmeier and Stephen Clapp have made a start.