



New Play Sets Science Fiction Classic to Music

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The Hidden Sky (music and lyrics by Peter Foley, book by Kate Chisolm) is an adaptation of Ursula Le Guin's short story "The Masters," from the legendary science fiction author's 1975 collection *The Wind's Twelve Quarters*.

In the stage version premiering at the Prince Music Theater in Philadelphia, we are presented with members of a religious group -- "Believers" -- celebrating the life of a founding saint, their Blessed Ganil.

As their ritual performance unfolds, we see episodes from Ganil's life as a young engine master in a society -- otherworldly, futuristic -- where all calculation and invention are forbidden. Since measurement and Arabic numerals are considered evil, citizens are restricted to working with rules of thumb and Roman numerals.

But Ganil is curious, and she is drawn to a group of esoteric thinkers -- "Seekers" -- who covertly pursue knowledge of mathematics, physics, and medicine.

God is in the proportions

Through her scientific work, Ganil discovers the Golden Mean in a quasi-religious experience, taking the ratio to represent the Face of God.

Her fellow Seeker Mede, probably her lover, is more interested in the practical applications of the "sciences" rather than their inherent beauty. One day, the ever-present clouds that blanket this planet part, allowing the sun, which the inhabitants worship as God, to show through.

Mede is caught measuring the sun, and is tried for heresy. In the inquisition that follows, Mede is burned at the stake and Ganil, maimed by the forces of orthodoxy, leaves the city behind.

Many years later, or so the Believers say, she returned to her native land. One assumes that a new religion formed around her and her discoveries of the Golden Mean.

Staging an alien planet

There is a great deal to praise in this production, directed by Ben Levit. Throughout the show, excellently crafted and executed lighting designs by Troy Martin O'Shea added depth and intensity to the spare set.

Especially powerful was the use of hand-held lights projecting spirals, mathematical symbols, and equations during Ganil's dream sequences. The illuminated equations on Ganil's work-scrolls were also very successful.

Another strong element was the choreography of Brian Sanders. His complex yet elegant designs provided essential motion and tone to a story highly dependent upon lyrics and dialogue. I left wanting to see more of the ritualistic gestures and folk-dance movements presented early on.

Pitfalls of the word

The music and lyrics were catchy and professionally wrought. However, they are still problematic, exhibiting some of the pitfalls common to the "new musical" genre.

Foley takes advantage of Le Guin's dialogue-driven writing, using many direct quotations from the story.

However, such a reliance upon prose can create shapeless, verbose musical numbers.

The blurring of the distinction between recitative (the "what is happening" words) and song/aria (the "expressive/ reflective" words), is inherent in the genre and can be difficult for even the most accomplished composer to handle.

Pitfalls of the exotic

More deeply, while Foley displays a wide knowledge of many "world music" styles, he fails to apply this knowledge to deep effect in *The Hidden Sky*.

To his credit, he combines disparate elements quite seamlessly -- starting with faux-Sufi singing, moving through classic Andrew Lloyd Webber and ending with a big "power ballad" finish, all in one tune.

However, this fusion of styles fails to develop, instead graying out through not really exploring any of the individual musical traditions in any depth.

By failing to develop his musical synthesis, Foley misses an opportunity to communicate his characters' changing emotions and motivations. Instead, the music provides none of the formal structure from which the work as a whole -- especially the second act -- could have benefited.

In a "composer's statement" Foley lists Kate Bush as an influence. I would suggest finding some Henry Kaiser, Richard Thompson or Lakshmi Shankar to see how successful collaborations between musical cultures can be.

A welcome relief

Still, these complaints are more in the line of regrets over missed opportunities than true flaws. Otherwise, *The Hidden Sky* is a very good show well served here by an excellent production.

Its science fiction story and the aspirations of its musical score are welcome relief from much of what passes for musical drama these days. Go see it, but don't think too hard about it.

The play will run in Philadelphia through March 19.