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Palmer superb in Galileo

By SANDRA SOUCHOTTE

The single, isolated genius in an age of transition, burdened by truth and condemned for his vision: the trappings are those with which we would want to dress a hero. But Brecht, after leading us dramatically, heroic image by image, to the point of bloody self-sacrifice in the name of truth and honour, offers recantation rather than immolation as the play's ascendant climactic moment. Faced with torture and possible death, Galileo will deny that the sun is the centre of the universe. His moral position may be right or wrong; the truth of his knowledge can never be wrong. At this point, Galileo, far-sighted man of science of the 17th century, becomes a uniquely 29th century persona — the anti-hero.

In Tony Palmer's superb acting as Galileo, we are given an extraordinary man (but not a superman), disdainful of traditional heroism, who chooses a loss of virtue rather than a loss of mission and resolves his personal dilemma without sacrifice of life. That Brecht saw something of the "tormented genius" in himself is given credence in Kurt Reis' highly sympathetic adaptation and the play skillfully exemplifies the scenes of confrontation and personal resolution with which Brecht loved to confound his audiences.

Brecht does not provide his important people with platforms upon which they can expound justifications for their actions and thereby leave the audience with a weighty package of definitive explanation; instead he presents a complexity of thought, a multi-sided argument, which works to draw condemnation away from the characters and onto the society which has trapped them. Even in this play, in which we have a larger-than-life central figure who very nearly achieves martyrdom, the main protagonist is still the church with all its pomp and circumstance and power. It is an institution of control and authority, venerated for its longevity rather than its wisdom, and representative of all the stultified tradition, hypocrisy and convention which Brecht hated much more than the lesser villains who were its mouthpiece. And so we



Tony Palmer plays an aged Galileo some years after his recantation who is again confronted with his past vision and is seen clutching a new manuscript even as he condemns himself.

are left with a duality of thought such as:

"unhappy is the land that breeds no hero"
 "unhappy is the land that needs a hero"

It requires considerable skill to take twentieth century notions of man, theatre and society, incorporate them into a seventeenth century surrogate — Galileo and still tell a story about the birth of modern science and what its uncorrupted vision might have been. Something very close to this has been done in this play and one of the reasons why it works is because the set, the musical accompaniment and the various trappings and costumes consistently solidify the multifaceted thought of the play.

A huge, metallic, mandala-like sphere looms over an elliptical, stark, white stage. Besides suggesting a dominating sun hovering over an earth, momentarily frozen in time, the embossed surface of the sun-sphere provides a

pattern of inter-woven images of science and Christian suffering. It is a never-ending dichotomy. Often during the play the action represented on the stage is seen as a reflection of the larger image up above. Liturgical chanting is used to sum-up or dramatize events, using words not of the church but of science. In addition, the superb effect of colour against a white background, if mentioned, must also acknowledge a small bow to Peter Brook.

In a production that comes close to being magnificent it hardly seems valid to scrounge for criticisms. Perhaps some of the images of impending doom were somewhat repetitious and over-worked — that is not as important as the fact that maybe we are at last beginning to experience a theatre of vitality in Toronto.

If this first production of the St. Lawrence Centre's repertoire is any indication, the rest of the season holds great promise.

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