

In 'Happiest Song Plays Last,' good intentions come with some off-key notes

latimes.com/algo.html

By Charles McNulty



"The Happiest Song Plays Last" begins with Iraq War veteran Elliot (Peter Pasco) in Jordan, working as a consultant and actor in a war movie. (Gio Solis / Bracero.la)

When we last checked in on Elliot at the end of "Water by the Spoonful," the middle work in Quiara Alegria Hudes' three-play Elliot cycle, he was in Puerto Rico with his cousin Yaz scattering the ashes of his beloved surrogate mother, Ginny, and deciding on his future.

Rather than return to Philadelphia with Yaz, who had just surprised him with the news that she had bought Ginny's house and was prepared to step into her community leader shoes, Elliot announced that he was flying to Los Angeles to pursue his dream of becoming a movie star before his invisible war injuries and more longstanding psychological demons get the better of him.

"The Happiest Song Plays Last," the final installment in the series, opened last week in an unsettled Latino Theater Company production at the Los Angeles Theatre Center. Although the staging disappoints, it has made it possible to see the entire trilogy. ("Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue" just ended its run at the Kirk Douglas Theatre and "Water by the Spoonful" continues at the Mark Taper Forum through March 11.)

After a musical prologue set around images of recent natural disasters in Puerto Rico and Mexico, "The Happiest Song Plays Last" begins with Elliot (Peter Pasco) shooting a war

docudrama in Jordan. An Iraq War veteran, he was hired as a consultant and coach, but his intensity and commitment landed him the lead role when the original star turned out to be too soft.

The scene Elliot is shooting, an action sequence involving an Arab American actress named Shar (Vaneh Assadourian), is presented in such a way as to keep us slightly off balance. Life and art blur as readily as the past and the present in a drama that moves fluidly across time and space.



Peter Pasco and Vaneh Assadourian. (Gio Solis / Bracero.la)

Magical realism is deployed as needed, but Hudes also exploits more ordinary technological means. Elliot, who's in the Middle East as the Arab Spring explodes in Egypt's Tahrir Square, maintains a smartphone-to-laptop lifeline to Yaz (Elisa Bocanegra), who has assumed Ginny's maternal role in the North Philadelphia neighborhood that has come to depend on her home cooking every bit as much as her activism.

The play continues to make music central to the trilogy's architectonics. The embracing sound of Puerto Rican folk is as important to "The Happiest Song Plays Last" as Bach is to "Elliot, A Soldier's Fugue" and John Coltrane's dissonance jazz is to "Water by the Spoonful." Nelson González plays both the classical guitar and the cuatro (described in the play as "Puerto Rico's national instrument, much like the guitar but with a metallic twang") in scenes that evoke heritage, tradition, community and family — all that ballasts the characters' buffeted lives.

The profuse and daring scenic variety of "The Happiest Song Plays Last" hints at the influence of Tony Kushner's "Angels in America." The play's impressive scope is apparent in the wide range of characters, which includes a simple-minded homeless visitor (John Seda-Pitre), an

older married musician with a tenderness for Yaz (Al Rodrigo) and an Arab film worker (Kamal Marayati) who tries to help Elliot connect to his haunted wartime past.

Hudes' drama is more difficult to stage than it might seem on the page. Director Edward Torres, whose production of "Water by the Spoonful" at San Diego's Old Globe was such a raw and stirring success, seems overmatched and under-resourced here.



Elisa Bocanegra as Yaz, Elliot's cousin, and Al Rodrigo as the married musician with a tenderness for her. (Gio Solis / Bracero.la)

Se Hyun Oh's set divides the playing area between Yaz's Philadelphia kitchen and various Middle East locales in a cramped and clumsy manner. Actors don't have enough space to perform the physical tasks required of them. The design shouldn't be realistic, but the logistics make it impossible for anyone to buy into the theatrical world.

The play demands cinematic agility, but the performers have trouble keeping up. Their characters often seem disconnected and at sea. The overall rhythm of the production is halting. An unreality pervades what looks like an underrehearsed production.

Perhaps there's a reason the Elliot cycle hasn't been performed all at once in the same city before. It's a huge undertaking requiring as much precision as ambition.

Good intentions aren't enough. But if expectations have fallen short, this introduction isn't for naught. Hudes' plays are important additions to our national drama, and there will be future opportunities to experience their wide-ranging theatrical music as Elliot heroically struggles to make himself whole.



'The Happiest Song Plays Last'

Where: The Los Angeles Theatre Center, Tom Bradley Theater, 514 S. Spring St., L.A.

When: 8 p.m. Fridays-Saturdays, 3 p.m. Sundays, 7:30 Mondays; ends March 19

Tickets: \$24-\$52

Information: (866) 811-4111 or www.thelatc.org

Running time: 2 hours, 5 minutes



Pasco as Elliot. (Gio Solis / Bracero.la)

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