

And Yet It Does Move!

The stars are out in UT's production of *The Life of Galileo*

by Kieron Barry

With a scattering of exceptional actors, a couple of thrilling *coups de theatre*, and one touch of authentic genius, the Clarence Brown kicks off its 2008 season with a deserved swagger.

Bertolt Brecht's *The Life of Galileo*, a lengthy but compelling account of the astronomer's pursuit of scientific truth, remains painfully relevant, and it's with a jolt that one recalls it was only 15 years ago that the Catholic Church apologized for hounding him. Brecht's Galileo is a wonderfully and, by the final act, all-too-human genius who proves unable to muster the necessary ethical maturity to balance the greatness of his intellect. Brecht does not allude to the famous "Eppur si muove" ("And yet it does move!") disclaimer which Galileo reputedly delivered in a Clinton-esque *sotto voce* semantic after his compulsory denial of the Earth's movement around the sun. (He does include, though, the fascinating assertion that the Pope permitted Galileo's handlers to show him their instruments of torture but did not license their use.)

The last *Galileo* I saw was at London's National Theatre a couple of years ago. A little unfair to compare Roderick Peeples' Galileo to Simon Russell Beale's, the latter being arguably the world's greatest living actor. But by any measure, Peeples' performance could afford to be a little lighter and much more brisk. He falls into the trap of assuming every confrontation must be

an angry one and, given the disputatious nature of the text, this makes his reading rather cumbersome.

The production is redeemed, however, by three actors of national caliber. First, Carol Mayo Jenkins as Galileo's long-suffering housekeeper gives a sinuous yet subtle performance of dry, deft poetry. Second, David Kortemeier, in a host of small but significant roles, proves himself a fascinatingly varied actor. The name to watch, however, is the young Adam Heffernan, whose relaxed but dazzling performance is revelatory. Anyone possessing the slightly macabre urge to boast about having seen stars when they were unknowns should scramble to the Clarence Brown A.S.A.F.P. This kid will be big.

By way of visual relief from the numerous static expositions, we're awarded a superb carnival with huge puppets and a delightfully costumed masked ball courtesy of Bill Black. Additionally, Narelle Sissons' initially straightforward, functional set suddenly offers, with a split-second shift, a breathtaking panoply of the heavens as Galileo turns his gaze to the night sky. Subsequent tricks with the backdrop include some clever tilting mirrors, although as every film director knows, a mirror in shot must be treated with caution. These reflectors allowed us to spy on a young actress in the wings endearingly skipping with delight (or was it nerves?) before making her entrance.

The touch of genius comes in the closing moments of the play. Director Calvin MacLean's final



Roderick Peeples' stars in Clarence Brown's stellar production of Brecht's *The Life of Galileo*.

ace is a last-minute flourish of such power that it sends a shiver up the spine of the entire play, yet of such intelligence that it does so with just a small, unmoving, everyday object. At once cheeky and shocking, this single idea transforms an enjoyable evening into an essential one.

And finally, a word about these standing ovations. Every play I've seen in the last six months has received one, regardless of merit. But the more we give them, the less they mean. By now, standing ovations in American theatre are as formulaic and compulsory as encores at a rock concert—the only significance they can offer is in their absence. Failure to elicit a standing ovation presumably delivers to today's actors all the shock that was once the preserve of

that truly bloodcurdling phenomenon—booing (something I have witnessed just once in a theater but shall never forget). We might think we're being kind and generous by rising dutifully to our feet after each performance, but actually we're depriving actors of a vital measure by which they could distinguish a strong performance from a magical one. But progress—or inflation—can't be stopped. We can't hold back the tide now. Instead, for the one performance in 100 that will endure, allow me to suggest we all simply fire our guns into the air. ☺

What: *The Life of Galileo*

Where: Clarence Brown Theatre

When: Jan. 31-Feb. 17

Tickets: \$5-\$30, 656-4444



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