



JTC's Charlotte Salomon production not just good

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Sacha Reich says her adaptation of Charlotte Salomon's "Life? or Theater?" which closed Feb. 20 after a three-week run at the Disjecta performance space in North Portland, was all Salomon's words, or almost so. Reich said she added one word, just one.

That one word was "good," which she inserted at the conclusion of a scene involving a conversation about Salomon's proposed studies at a Berlin fashion design school.

Having read a popular abridgement of Salomon's monumental work and then having seen Reich's adaptation—which she also directed, it is apparent that Reich was meticulously faithful to the author's text, although she had to be selective owing to the length of the original.

But Reich—the executive director of the Jewish Theater Collaborative, which produced the play in partnership with Disjecta and the Oregon Holocaust Resource Center—is modest.

What she brought to the staging of Salomon's work here in Portland was not just "good." It was great. It was a night of profoundly stimulating theater, highlighted by skillful stagecraft on the part of a gifted cast and an imaginative and adept technical crew.

And then there was the singing, the startling splendor of which made one's spine tingle.

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It was a splendid evening of theater in a style that Reich said is not common in America—more European, she called it, an amalgam of Salomon’s expressionist paintings, narrative theater (most of the dialogue is in the author’s third person) and music that blended cabaret and classical.

In fact, taken as a whole, the evening of theater was a rigorous exercise in expressionism built from two-dimensional, three-dimensional, dramatic and musical components that blended seamlessly and produced a result that was uncommonly sophisticated.

For those who failed to see this production and are not familiar with Charlotte Salomon and her artistic achievement, some background is called for.

Salomon was a German Jewish woman, a former student at the Berlin Academy of Art, whose family sent her in 1941 from Berlin to what they presumed was a safe haven from the Nazis in the south of France. She was 24. There, she painted during almost all her waking hours. She created a 700-page work of genius that included not just her paintings, but extensive text and music.

She chronicled with some whimsy and much incisive dark commentary her and her family’s life up to and including her exile in France where the Gestapo ultimately found her. They sent her to Auschwitz where they killed her on Oct. 10, 1943.

Her art survived and eventually made its way to a permanent exhibit at the Jewish Historical Museum of Amsterdam. Salomon’s father and stepmother survived the Holocaust in hiding in Holland.

The JTC production of Salomon’s work may be unique. Reich is unaware of anything like it having been done elsewhere.

She mentioned a past effort to present the work as an opera. She was aware of a puppet show version and a one-woman show by a performer in Los Angeles, the latter about efforts to produce the work in Israel, efforts that failed when Salomon’s now late stepmother (the Paulinka Bimbam character of this production) intervened.

Innovative and first-rate regional theater has become an accepted reality of American theater in general in recent decades. The JTC production of “Life? or Theater?” underscores that fact and the additional reality that there is a home for first-tier talent in cities all across America today—and Portland is one of them.

Reich’s JTC production, which evolved over about two years distinguishes all who were involved in the project.

Jamie M. Rea as Charlotte was credible throughout, never faltering in interpretations of her character that shifted fluidly from broad caricature to subtle innuendos of Charlotte’s complex inner life compounded by exterior events that ranged from joyous to neurotic, depressive and terrifying.

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Rea is a theater arts graduate of Reed College who has performed, directed and designed for important theater companies across North America and around the world.

Ida Rae Cahana was radiant as the stepmother Paulinka Bimbam. She sang Schubert, Bach, Gluck, bits of Mendelsohn and Handel, as well as Saloman's lyrics for a Friedrich Hollaender classic made famous by Marlene Dietrich. Her voice was captivating on every occasion.

Besides Cahana, Rea was supported by an equally talented cast including Doren Elias Michele M. Mariana, Kate Mura, Darrell Salk, George Lederer, Bill Barry, Sam A. Mowry and Cindy McGean.

Mariana, who played Charlotte's grandmother Frau Knarre, stunned the audience when she too began to sing—darkly and in the style of 1930s art songs, an extended trope inspired by the work of Kurt Weill.

Reich said Mariana's lyrics came from a poem in Salomon's book. "Our composer, Rodolfo Ortega, sought to find the right genre for the lyrics to live in." He took Kurt Weil as his inspiration.

In Mariana's haunting voice in an almost cavernous register, the song expresses contradictions between Salomon's idyllic refuge in the south of France and a world that is coming apart.

The story told in Salomon's work is dark, typically expressionistic. However, Reich's production of the work, while true to the artist's intent, was not without humor. There were many points throughout the play in which the darkness of its inevitable destination was brightened by comic turns.

I would have liked to have seen this play again and to have been able to share it with others.

It was memorable theater of the highest order.