

Bach At Leipzig

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The year is 1722 and some of the finest musicians of the age have descended on Leipzig, Germany, in hopes of succeeding Johann Kuhnau as organist of the Thomaskirche. Since no early 18th Century musician can achieve success without the patronage of the nobility or the church, a post like Kuhnau's is one worth fighting for, even if this means lying, scheming, and double-crossing to obtain it.

If the above teaser sounds like the opening of an epic historical drama, think again. Itamar Moses' *Bach At Leipzig* turns out to be one of the laugh-out-loud funniest comedies you're likely to see this or any century, blending elements of screwball and farce with uncommon intelligence and originality.

Six musicians share the stage in *Bach At Leipzig*, all of whom are named either Johann or Georg (one of the play's myriad running gags), and none of whom has anywhere near the fame of the titular but conspicuously absent J. Sebastian Bach. They are:

J. Friedrich Fasch (Rob Nagle), a virtuous, free-thinking, and oh-so romantic organist from Zerbst. When writing to his beloved Anna, a single endearment is never enough for Fasch, so she becomes his "sweet angel," his "gingersnap," his "meadow," his "lamb," his "empath," and his "milk-skinned moppet," and that's just in his first letter to his honey.

G. Balthasar Schott (Joel Polis), the sour, conniving, old-school organist at Leipzig's own Neuekirche, whose wig is wound as tautly as his ass is tight.

G. Lenck (Dominic Conti), from Laucha, a man too poor even to have a middle name. Lenck is a habitual pickpocket, master forger, and sometimes cross-dresser.

J. Martin Steindorff (Henry Clarke), a dashing handsome young Don Juan from Zwickau, with a string of mistresses as long as Fasch's list of endearments to his "will-o'-the-wisp" Anna.

G. Friedrich Kaufmann (Leland Crooke) from Merseberg, the eldest of the bunch. Since this dim, feather-brained (but curiously endearing) bumbler has left his wife Gisela back home with only her gardener, her valet, and her footman to keep her company, is it any surprise that Steindorff is among the men with whom she has cuckolded her unsuspecting husband?

J. Christoph Graupner (Bill Brochtrup), who arrives deliberately late from Darmstadt "to build the anticipatory dread of the others," only to find that his five competitors have already left the room—par for the course for the "second-greatest" organist in Germany. Graupner boasts about having "a name so recognizable that many people think they have heard of me, without being quite sure."

As these six organists plot, scheme, and connive to obtain Kuhnau's coveted post, playwright Moses weaves thread after thread of running jokes, e.g. the "mysterious powder from the East" which Fasch is wont to inhale, a frequent mocking of anything not German ("We are not here to experience *pure feeling!* This is not Italy!"), and the conspicuous absence of "the greatest organist in Germany" ("Shh! Don't say his name!")

Another running gag is the "wild brigand" whose presence on the road to Leipzig has prompted the six musicians to conceal their musical scores in a variety of secret hiding places. Graupner, for example, informs us that "when I travel, I attach my scores to the flesh of my thighs with surgical thread," a joke which not only gets laughs but leads to a bloody good payoff in the second act.

The fact that half the musicians are named Johann and half Georg provides ample food for Moses' clever pen. Take, for instance, this exchange:

Georg Schott: I have a younger brother in Zwickau. Perhaps you know him? Johann?

Johann Steindorff: Perhaps. What's his name?

Georg Schott: That is his name.

(There are a pair of even funnier payoffs the third and fourth time the gag pops up.)

Moses' script is not merely funny; it is exceedingly smart as well. Take for example Steindorff's remark that "a halfhearted show of diplomacy is the final step toward open war," or when Schott responds to Fasch's "Why must everything have a name?" with a simple but profound "So that we know which houses to burn." Comparisons between religious denominations of the era—Lutherans, Calvinists, and Pietists—are as illuminating as they are humorous, as is Fasch and Schott's discussion of innovation vs. craftsmanship or whether music should be a means of religious expression or exist simply for its own sake.

Intelligent and clever as Moses' writing is, the playwright isn't above touches of burlesque humor, as when characters take each other's language a good deal too literally:

Schott: What brings you here?

Fasch: Stagecoach, primarily.

and

Schott: I was hoping to have a word.

Steindorff: (*Thoughtfully.*) "Cantankerous."

There's also some occasional cattiness that would do All About Eve's Addison DeWitt proud, as when Steindorff, claws out, tells Kaufmann "Your understanding of politics is as nuanced as your music." (Kaufmann of course takes it as a compliment.)

Occasionally Moses' jokes fizzle:

Schott: (Reciting a list of 16th Century masters) Tunder, Kerll, Hammerschmidt, Scheidt, Schein, Schütz.

Steindorff: Gesundheit.

More often than not, though, they hit their mark.

Moses has constructed Act One as a fugue, something which becomes clear in Act Two's memorable opening sequence, a letter from Fasch to his beloved Anna, in which he describes the musical construction of a fugue while the other five characters replay the entire first act in mime,

following precisely the rules that Fasch is explaining. The sequence is stunningly staged by director Darin Anthony, spoken by Nagle, and performed—almost as a dance—by Polis, Conti, Clarke, Croke, and Brochtrup.

With a talented, imaginative young director like Anthony at the helm, it's no wonder *Bach At Leipzig* is blessed with pitch-perfect performances and even more laughs than a reading of Moses' very funny script provides. The six-man ensemble's acting is nothing short of sensational, each such a perfect fit for his part that to play favorites would slight the other five. (In actual fact, there are seven actors in all, the seventh [Alan Abelew] making several wordless appearances as "The Greatest Organist In Germany," oft described by the other characters as having a splendid speaking voice—which we never hear.) *Bach At Leipzig*, amusing on paper, is downright hilarious when these master comedic actors bring it to life under Anthony's exciting direction. The marvelously subtle Nagle starts getting laughs with the play's very first line, the seemingly innocuous "By the time you receive this letter, I will have sent it," and similarly, the frequent stage direction "-- releases a (carrier) pigeon and watches it ascend: the sound of wings ... wind" provokes steadily building laughter each time an invisible pigeon takes flight.

Act Two features some thrilling (sword)fight choreography by Bill Madden.

The starkness of Kurt Boetcher's as always excellent set design, a depiction of the interior of Leipzig's Tomaskirche, provides a perfect contrast to the glorious splendor of A. Jeffrey Schoenberg's early 18th Century costumes, "built from the ground up" for this production, and Wigs Rescue's character-perfect creations, from Graupner's 1940s drag queen-ready do to Kaufmann's Cowardly Lion look to Steindorff's Scarlet Pimpernel-like pony-tail. (Good sport [and handsomely-toned] Clarke appears through most of Act Two [un]dressed in some carefully attached leaves, and virtually nothing else.) Philip White's sensational sound design mixes Bach and the whir of carrier pigeons taking flight. (Another running gag is that music from inside the church is completely inaudible when the doors to the anteroom are shut tight—leading to some terrifically executed precision cues by sound operator David Kohanski.) Dan Jenkins' imaginative lighting completes *Bach At Leipzig*'s superb design package.

Don't let the "dull historical epic" title fool you. *Bach At Leipzig* is intelligent comedy at its very best—and most hilarious, and yet another winner from Ron Sossi's Odyssey Theatre Ensemble.

Odyssey Theatre, 2055 S. Sepulveda Blvd., West Los Angeles. Through August 23. Thursday through Saturdays at 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. Except Sunday 7/19 & 8/9 at 7:00 p.m. only. Wednesday performances on 7/08, 7/15 & 7/22 only. No performances on Thursday, July 31 and Friday, July 30. Reservations: 477-2055
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--Steven Stanley
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