

Review: In ‘Hans Christian Andersen: Tales Real and Imagined,’ No Happily Ever After

By Alexis Soloski

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Once upon a time a little boy became a literary sensation. A man with a peculiar take on happily ever after, the Danish author Hans Christian Andersen wrote tales that have inspired operas, ballets, a couple of Disney movies. His oversize statue — with oversize top hat and oversize cygnet — permanently hogs a granite bench in Central Park. Now Andersen arrives at the Duke on 42nd Street, with the Ensemble for the Romantic Century’s “Hans Christian Andersen: Tales Real and Imagined.”

Like all of the Ensemble’s shows, “Tales” synthesizes dramatic narrative with chamber music, offering a portrait of an artist through image and sound and here at least, some fantastic puppetry. Eve Wolf’s script complicates the sanitized Hans of Andersen’s own autobiography and the imagined one of the 1952 Danny Kaye movie, best remembered for Frank Loesser’s gentle, irrepressible score. But only up to a point. (It doesn’t, like Martin McDonagh’s viciously provocative “A Very Very Very Dark Matter,” suggest that his stories were actually written by a congolese woman he kept in a cage.) “Hans Christian Andersen” sidesteps and streamlines a lot of what makes Andersen’s life and work so discomfoting, while also insisting, inflexibly, gawkily, that the life and the work are inextricable.

We first meet Hans (Jimmy Ray Bennett) as a lily-clutching corpse, though he quickly rises from his bier, saying, “Do not be afraid. I only appear to be dead.” (Andersen, whose many phobias included premature burial, used to keep this note by his bed: “I only appear to be sleeping.”) After a quick trot through “The Princess and the Pea” — a story of another restless sleeper — Hans reappears as a teenager, the son of a cobbler and a washerwoman, making his way from sleepy Odense to Copenhagen, begging a place at the Royal Danish Theater. Some of his writings impress the theater’s director, Jonas Collin, who sends him to school and encourages his literary career.

But as his star rises, his heart breaks. He develops a passion, entirely unrequited, for Edvard (the countertenor Randall Scotting, who alternates in the role with Daniel Moody), Collin’s son. Unswervingly straight, Edvard was also such a snob that he wouldn’t even condescend to address Andersen, his lifelong correspondent and eventual benefactor, in the familiar “Du” form.

I’d been curious to see “Hans Christian Andersen,” because I can still remember how much Andersen’s stories upset me as a child, how sadistic I’d found them, how flimsy the reward of salvation seemed when the Tin Soldier melted, when the Little Match girl froze, when the Little Mermaid died and melted into sea foam. (Disney went another way.) I haven’t read them to my own children. Well, O.K., we did read “The Princess and the Pea” and then talked about whether or not a princess that delicate could possibly be any fun. Consensus: No. I wondered how I would feel re-encountering them as an adult. Would I like them even less now? Would tears warp my notebook?

As it happens, the tales, briefly told, brighten “Hans Christian Andersen,” showcasing the set designer Vanessa

James's playful toy theater and Flexitoon, Ltd.'s squashy puppets and marionettes, manipulated by Craig Marin and Olga Felgemacher. The stories — “The Ugly Duckling,” “The Little Mermaid,” “The Little Match Girl” — are presented as excerpts with a lot of the awful parts ignored or referred to only elliptically, which may be confusing if you don't know the stories or a relief if you do.

Ms. Wolf's script has its ellipses, too. The play reclaims Andersen as a queer writer and doesn't prettify his shame or his vanity, though it goes light on his social climbing and assorted hang-ups — dogs, pork, fire, etc. More significantly, it simplifies his life, regarding Edvard as his only real love — though he seems to have had romantic and sexual feelings for women, too, and regularly visited brothels, albeit only, he claimed, to talk. And it streamlines his work, insisting on biographical readings that position “The Little Mermaid” as a one-to-one allegory for hopeless love for Edvard, “The Little Match Girl” as a tribute to his mother.

Donald T. Sanders, the director, interleaves Hans's monologues and the puppet interludes with music, mostly from Henry Purcell and Benjamin Britten, neither an Andersen contemporary. (One imagines Purcell was chosen for his love of the fantastical, Britten for the way sexuality infuses the work. Neither is a great fit.) Sometimes the music, like a sprig of Britten's “A Midsummer Night's Dream,” integrates itself into the drama. Sometimes a song expresses an inner state. Often the action stops while the musicians play, however feelingly, which gives the show a stuttering rhythm, a mismatched shape.

This story of an ugly duckling, beak and all, “Hans Christian Andersen” never becomes a swan.

Hans Christian Andersen: Tales Real and Imagined

Through May 25 at the Duke on 42nd Street; 646-223-3010, dukeon42.org. 2 hours.

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