

Read On

Books and their consequences in two plays about free speech

By Michael Scott Moore

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Ever since the Ayatollah Khomeini heard about *The Satanic Verses*, and without reading the book laid a fatwa on the author's head in 1989, I've wanted to like Salman Rushdie. His essays are erudite and his interviews (when they happen) are always witty. The trouble is that Rushdie's fiction doesn't turn me on. *Midnight's Children* as well as *The Satanic Verses* struck me as fresh examples of what Charles Bukowski meant when he complained that modern writing "was a comfortable contrivance, a very slick and careful Word-Culture. ... It seemed as if everybody was playing word-tricks, that those who said almost nothing at all were considered excellent writers." *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* was Rushdie's

first novel after the fatwa, and his publishers touted it as almost-a-children's-book -- solid stuff for adults, but written for his 11-year-old son. The novel is about a storyteller named Rashid, who goes on a quest with his son Haroun to get back his inspiration. By way of answering a bitter question ("What's the point of stories that aren't even true?"), Rashid and Haroun join a Water Genie and a mechanical Hoopoe Bird in mortal battle against the Cultmaster Khattam-Shud, an Ayatollah-like enemy of the imagination who wants to poison the magnificent story sea.

Haroun works as a novel for adults because of Rushdie's word-tricks, but the play points out the hollowness of what's underneath. Tim Supple and David Tushingham adapted the book for the Royal National Theatre by keeping its most important lines and throwing out the rest; director Dominique Serrand and Berkeley Rep dramaturge Luan Schooler have whittled it down even further, for this production, and the result is a bright and beautiful and basically boring piece of theater.

Serrand himself does graceful, dignified work in the role of Rashid. Nora El Samahy is eager and boyish as Haroun, and Jennifer Baldwin Peden sings beautifully as Haroun's mother, Soraya. Colman Domingo is also wonderfully horrible as the Cultmaster Khattam-Shud, clubfooting around the stage and explaining that he can't tolerate storytelling because "inside every story is a world I can't control." *Haroun* has plenty of scattered charm, but the show lacks urgency, because its drama is so contrived.

One senses Serrand, as director -- along with his costume designer, Sonya Berlovitz -- trying too hard to be fabulous. David Kelly's Iff, the Water Genie, looks like an airport Hare Krishna with his blue sunglasses, green silk robe, tuft of hair at the forehead, and a character reminiscent of Japanese inked on his bare stomach -- weird, sure, but somehow short on inspiration. (Why not purple sunglasses, a lamé party dress, and a tattooed phrase in Swahili? Either way he wouldn't look like Rushdie's wizened *djinni*.) Butt the Hoopoe (Jarion Monroe) is just as pointless in a yellow robe, with colorful, glittery plastic sticks on his head and a blue feather boa. He looks like Robin Williams playing Papageno in *The Magic Flute*; if he looked like Bette Davis as an ostrich it would be just as clever.

Khomeini's death sentence made *Haroun's* airy fabulism easy to care about 12 years ago, when the book was published; now that Rushdie can appear in public without a security detail, as he did in Berkeley on opening night, the brightness of his characters has started to fade. By the end of *Haroun* you recognize the difference between really good "stories that aren't even true" and stories that are weightless.

Ken Friedman



Getting Ideas: Robert Sicular's bookseller fills Charles Dean's *Menocchio* with notions.

Details:

Haroun and the Sea of Stories Adapted by

Dominique Serrand

and Luan Schooler

from the play by Tim

Supple and David

Tushingham. Based

on the novel by

Salman Rushdie.

Starring Dominique

Serrand, Colman

Domingo, Nora El

Samahy, David

Kelly, and Jarion

Monroe. Though

Jan. 7 at the

Berkeley Rep's Roda

Theater, 2015

Addison (at

Shattuck), Berkeley.

Tickets are \$42-54;

call (510) 647-2949

or visit

www.berkeleyrep.org.

Menocchio Written

and directed by

Lillian Groag.

Starring Charles

Dean, Jeri Lynn

Cohen, Robert

Sicular, and Ken

Ruta. Produced by

the Berkeley Repertory Theater. Though Dec. 21 at the Berkeley Rep's Thrust Stage, 2025 Addison (at Shattuck), Berkeley. Tickets are \$42-54; call (510) 647-2949 or visit www.berkeleyrep.org.

Fortunately, there's a better choice on the Berkeley Rep's Thrust Stage: Lillian Groag's *Menocchio*. It even deals, like *Haroun*, with free speech. Several years ago, the Vatican opened some of its old records on the Inquisition for the first time, and the world learned that ordinary people, like the Italian miller Domenico Scandella (Menocchio to his friends), were persecuted just as feverishly by the church as certain famous Renaissance martyrs, like Galileo. So Groag wrote a populist version of Brecht's *Life of Galileo*, with Menocchio on the business end of a witless village witch-hunt for the crime of reading and making noise about certain banned books, like the Bible (in illegal translation) and *The Decameron*.

Menocchio is a holy fool, a simple Christian schlemiel who doesn't know when to keep his big mouth shut. His wife -- who goes by no other title or name -- is a bitter nag who cares about the laundry and the cooking more than new

ideas. ("What's this?" she says in the first scene. "Nothing, some book," Menocchio answers. "You *have* a book *already!*" she hollers.)

Menocchio buys his books from a shadowy Arab named Ibrahim and talks excitedly to the other villagers about everything he reads. When the local priest tries to shut him up, Menocchio is too caught up in his novel ideas to obey. Like the intellectual leaders of 16th-century Europe, from Martin Luther and Copernicus to Shakespeare, Menocchio has learned to think for himself, and the priest, accordingly, reports him to the local Inquisitor.

Groag's script is ambitious, playful, and fascinating, but it's also too long, and without Ken Ruta in the Inquisitor role I think the show would collapse. Ruta plays the imperious churchman with so much masterful gravity that his mere presence onstage makes the play fun to watch. He's as infinitely patient and as skin-crawlingly terrible as a cold Jesuit schoolmaster. Charles Dean is also strong as the cheerfully fearless Menocchio. The problem is that his trial scene explores Menocchio's religious notions at length and in detail, and a modern audience couldn't care less what his half-developed religious ideas might be. Menocchio is funny as a gadfly, but outdated as a philosopher. And the long trial takes time away from his punishment at the end, which is so brief and stylized it has no visceral punch.

There are other problems -- Jeri Lynn Cohen is mysteriously stiff as Menocchio's wife, and Robert Sicular does mostly hackneyed work as a few minor characters -- but the play, overall, is colorful and rich. Dan Hiatt is hilarious as a string of superstitious villagers, and Alexander V. Nichols' scenery of intersecting circles (an astrolabe, Copernicus' solar system, a compass) is brilliant. The flaws are just the downside of Groag's admirable ambition. She tries to build too much -- a historical epic about intellectual freedom, but also a stage-worthy metaphysical tract along the lines of *Don Juan in Hell* -- and forgets to fill in vital details. Still, around here we don't blame artists for ambition. *Menocchio* feels like a work in progress, but the outlines of a great play are there.