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Review: When Jules Verne Met Nellie Bly

By ANDY WEBSTER APRIL 11, 2015



Jonathan Hadary and Samantha Hill in "Jules Verne: From the Earth to the Moon" at BAM Fisher.

Photo Credit: Joan Marcus

Do you regard space travel as one of the highest callings in the destiny of our species? If so (and I do), head immediately to BAM Fisher in Brooklyn. The Ensemble for the Romantic Century's "Jules Verne: From the Earth to the Moon," a dazzling musical and multimedia paean to human aspiration, will send you into the stratosphere.

The show's framework is simple: It recounts the true-life meeting of the journalist and feminist Nellie Bly (Samantha Hill, Cosette in Broadway's "Les Misérables") and the science-fiction writer Jules Verne (Jonathan Hadary) in 1889, at Verne's home in Amiens, France.

Bly was on a global tour, sponsored by The New York World, to beat the mark set by Verne's character Phileas Fogg in "Around the World in 80 Days."

Verne, tended by his gruff, patient wife, Honorine (Jayne Atkinson), bemoans his declining health but vehemently champions the technological ambition and can-do spirit of the United States. And he is delighted with Bly's company. Who wouldn't be? The boyishly tousled Ms. Hill — clad in robust tartans (costumes courtesy of Vanessa James) — is resolute, enthusiastic and gracious. When she admiringly sings the Stephen Foster song "Beautiful Dreamer" to Verne, it is a valentine to the imagination.



Jayne Atkinson and Jonathan Hadary in "Jules Verne: From the Earth to the Moon."
Photo Credit: Joan Marcus

Bly is celebrated in a sequence featuring a charming barbershop quartet (Brian J. Gay, Andrew Howard, Matt MaGrath and Keaton Williams) in newsboy caps and waistcoats, who hoist her aloft as a list of future American milestones — desegregation, gay rights, women's suffrage — is projected around them.

But there is plenty more going on in this sparkling constellation, directed by Donald T. Sanders. Ingenious video design by David Bengali, on three screens, intercuts images of majestic nebulas and spiraling galaxies (some from the Hubble Telescope) with animated diagrams of elliptical trajectories, lunar module footage and clips from George Méliès's pioneering 1902 film fantasy "A Trip to the Moon." When a twinkling cosmos melds with the ocean's surface during Bly's trans-Atlantic voyage, the imagery is sheer poetry.

Enhancing the breathtaking visuals is a first-rate chamber ensemble, comprising Sean Lee on violin; Jiyoung Lee on cello; Andrew Gonzalez on viola; Max Barros on piano; and Eve Wolf, who wrote the show, also on piano. Playfully joining in at times is Joe Jung on banjo and mandolin.

Their exquisite, alternately delicate and muscular playing (including works by Chausson, Gottschalk and Chaminade) is not without humor: Following intermission, the musicians perform in aeronautical jumpsuits.

Verne envisioned aviation's thrust into the stars. Bly, who completed her trip ahead of schedule, rightly predicted that women would have the vote by 1922. The march of progress continues.

"Jules Verne: From the Earth to the Moon" continues through Sunday at BAM Fisher, Fishman Space, 321 Ashland Place, near Lafayette Avenue, Fort Greene, Brooklyn; 718-636-4100, bam.org.