

Peter Filichia's Diary
September 14, 2009
It's Time for Time after Time

Is it all right for me to review a mere reading?

Bookwriter-lyricist Stephen Cole and composer Jeffrey Saver probably won't mind, given that I adored their new musical that was recently given a sharp staged reading by Gabriel Barre. The response from the packed room on the 5th floor of Chelsea Studios on West 26th Street showed I wasn't alone.

The musical is *Time after Time*, which you might know from Nicholas Meyer's 1979 movie that was nominated for both an Edgar and a Hugo. In it, Malcolm McDowell played H.G. Wells, David Warner portrayed his friend Dr. John Stephenson, and Mary Steenburgen was Amy Robbins, the woman they'd both eventually meet.

Cole, though, has returned more to the source material, the 1979 novel written by Karl Alexander. But it's still the story of H.G. Wells, a writer, inventor, and intellectual who lives in 1895, but dreams of a future Utopian society. Wells tells Stephenson that "Crime only exists because the British monarchy and the church hierarchy oppose most of the people and let a privileged few do as they please." Stephenson disagrees, and says that crime will always exist.

He should know, for he's committing crimes left and right – or up and down, depending on how he decides to slice a person open with his knife. John, in fact, is Jack the Ripper.

Alexander's novel stressed something that the film didn't, a concept to which Cole has returned: John originally had an incestuous relationship with his sister. She was the aggressor, though – until she fell in love with another man whom she suddenly decided to marry. In dumping her brother, she deeply hurt John. He was so angered that he killed her, and since then, he's been symbolically killing her over and over again.

One night, Wells is showing John his just-finished new invention – a Time Machine. Of course John shows skepticism, but Wells playfully says, "If your mind can go back in time, why not the rest of you?" The song, "In Time," is a lovely patter song (that was accompanied by the patter of little and big feet in the audience).

Suddenly, though, there's a knock on the door, and Wells excuses himself to go to the other room to answer it. John overhears that the callers are policemen, who have finally caught up with him. He only has one option, and it's not a promising one: Can he actually get into this Time Machine and propel himself into the future?

Yes, he can. Once everyone comes in and finds an empty room – and no Time Machine – Wells knows what's happened. Soon after the police leave, the Time Machine returns; Wells had also invented a homing device that brings the machine back to its place of origin – though one could override that if he had a certain key. Wells does; John doesn't.

Not yet, anyway.

Wells sure doesn't want a serial killer on the loose in the future, so he plans to follow John wherever – and whenever – he went. It turns out to be 2010, and while Alexander and Meyer set their works in San Francisco, Cole has opted for New York City. Lord knows it's a place which plenty of people have celebrated in song, but not quite in the way that Wells will. For one thing, he's astonished to see that a “theater is playing more than 20 different plays.” He's more astonished when he goes to McDonald's, takes out his wallet, and has it taken from him by a passing thief. Like Vershinin in *Three Sisters*, he'd expected that the future world would be incredibly beautiful.

With the little money left that the robber didn't get, Wells goes to a bank to change his pounds into dollars. The transaction is completed, but Wells is so taken with teller Amy Robbins that he forgets to take his money. When she calls him back to the window, he says, “Tender is important,” and she most assuredly agrees – though she of course is thinking of a very different kind of tender. “Watch My Interest Accrue,” she sings, in one of many clever Cole lyrics and jaunty Saver melodies – but not before she happens to mention to Wells that there had been another bank customer who was dressed in equally old-fashioned clothes and was changing pounds into bucks. Wells goes to the Hyatt that Amy had recommended to John.

John, meanwhile, is in the hotel's restaurant where he comes on to waitress Carol Green, who's dazzled by his good looks and charm. They make a date for later, just before Wells finds John. When Wells accuses his friend, John pooh-poohs his recent activities. He points to TV, where they see westerns, nuclear explosions -- and wrestling. “Plenty of violence,” John asserts. “It's good to be home at last” – though he does want the option of getting that key to the Time Machine, just in case he needs to make a quick getaway. Wells goes to the

police for help, but getting them to believe that a Jack the Ripper is in their midst isn't easy. All four principals ruminate how the world can change in "One Little Day," another Cole-Saver winner.

As if Wells doesn't have enough fears, he's greatly alarmed the next morning – when he is awakened by the clock radio next to Amy's bed. (Awright, H.G.!) The bad news is that there had been a vicious killing during the night, and Wells knows who did it – though he doesn't quite know how to break that news to Amy. This time when he goes to the police, they're a little more receptive, but not much. What's worse is that after he leaves, one detective says, "Either he's gonna lead us to the killer, or he's our man." That's the downside of knowing too much.

Wells tries explaining the Time Machine, causing the skeptical Amy to ask, "How many years does it get to the gallon?" So Wells takes her three days into the future and then shows her a newspaper. It does convince her, but she sure doesn't like the front page story that an Amy Robbins was murdered the night before.

But this is a romance, too, and Amy comes to realize that, via in Cole's astute lyric set to Saver lovely melody, "all my life, I was taught to be aware if you're careful, you'll never have to care." Now she feels differently. Of course, she must also come to terms with the fact that she's in love with a MUCH older man (a far less problematic scenario than Susan had in Big, when she feared going to jail for consorting with a 13-year-old).

Telling how it all ends would be unfair to the authors, but let me say that if you knew a great deal about H.G. Wells' personal life before you entered the theater, you'd have a leg up in guessing what happened.

As for the reading, it was beautifully cast. Andy Karl, making time from his final week of 9 to 5, was an erudite Wells who found the passion within him. The always enchanting Lauren Kennedy was no less here. Mandy Gonzalez reached the heights as Carol, while Matt Bogart showed both John's aristocratic and evil side. (By the way, before I left for the reading, I was watching the film of Sweet Smell of Success, and when I came home and returned to it, I realized that when the life story of Tony Curtis is filmed, Bogart must get the part.)

When the show is produced next year, none of these talents will be with it, though not because they're too busy or because Barre wouldn't want them. Time after Time is getting a full production done by the students at Point Park

University in Pittsburgh. I'm planning to get there by plane, train automobile, or Time Machine.

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