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East West's 'Passion' is worth the wait

BY DARYL H. MILLER

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TIMES STAFF WRITER

Wrapped in a woozy post-coital embrace, a couple launch into a musical ode to love. The lyrics are sugary; the melody seems to burst with happiness.

It's exactly what one would expect from a show called "Passion."

But within minutes, lyricist-composer Stephen Sondheim and book writer James Lapine begin to yank theatergoers out of this reverie and toss them into a world where love is desperate and calculating. Everything is upside down, inside out. This isn't how love is supposed to be.

The music, meanwhile, becomes ever more complex, almost operatic. There are no clear-cut songs, no gaps for applause, and although the famous Sondheim wit and sophistication are present, they've assumed such an unaccustomed form that they're all but unrecognizable.

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Consequently, “Passion” divides even Sondheim’s most ardent fans into those who find themselves choking back sobs by the final, tragic scene and those who give the show a great big raspberry.

It’s a tricky, dangerous show, which might help explain why it has taken more than nine years for a fully staged production to be mounted in Los Angeles. But the city finally has one -- and for the most part, it’s a beauty -- at East West Players, where performers and production teams of mostly Asian Pacific descent have now staged eight of Sondheim’s shows.

Director Tim Dang delivers a production faithful to the intentions of the original 1994 staging of “Passion,” which won four Tony Awards, including best musical. His work helps keep theatergoers glued to their seats throughout a butt-tiring two hours, without intermission.

The show’s weakest moments, interestingly, are those first, happy ones. This is due partly to casting. As a young Italian army captain and his mistress, Michael Dalager and Linda Igarashi are appropriately trim and good-looking, qualities necessary to an opening scene that calls for artfully concealed nudity. But their thin singing voices have a pop quality, when the music demands a rich, full, operatic sound.

Then Dalager’s Giorgio is transferred from Milan -- in 1863 -- to a remote, cheerless military outpost. There he encounters the sickly, unattractive cousin of the post’s commander. She falls obsessively in love with him, and the world as he knows it is pulled apart.

The instant Jacqueline Kim appears as the unfortunate Fosca, the production vaults to another level. Her eyes are downcast, the sockets darkened to make them appear sunken by illness. She musters a strained smile for the dashing Giorgio. “I hope I didn’t startle you,” she says, apologizing for her unexpected arrival as well as her less-than-comely appearance. Timid, haunted and frail, she sings in a tremulous half-whisper that swells to unexpected power when her passions overtake her.

In her early scenes with Giorgio, Kim’s Fosca steals glances at him when he isn’t looking, her face filled with self-reproach for even daring to hope that he might look back at her the way she looks at him. Trying to be gentlemanly, he treats her with politeness. But she seizes upon this and turns it back on him. Soon the broken little wren is a hawk circling its prey, twisting his words and setting traps -- determined to will his love into being. The audience sits there thinking, “Run, you fool!” But even when Giorgio tries to do so, he finds himself drawn back in.

The tide of Giorgio’s emotion begins to turn (by this point, Dalager’s performance has grown much more nakedly emotional) as Fosca sings the score’s most self-contained piece of music, a perfect, delicate little song that declares: “Loving you / Is not a choice, / It’s who I am....It gives me purpose, / Gives me voice, / To say to the world: / This is

Some moments don't work, such as a dinner table scene that prompts titters from the audience when Fosca plants a letter under Giorgio's napkin and surreptitiously grabs his hand in front of the other officers while the lights dim and spooky music plays in the background.

The heavily synthesized accompaniment -- played by three keyboardists, a keyboardist-percussionist and a contrabassist -- is also a drawback. This score demands swelling strings.

But Victoria Petrovich's stylized set, covered in symbolically twisted, barren branches, and Naomi Yoshida Rodriguez's meticulously detailed costumes lend the production a rich feel, while Kim's performance slowly draws the audience inside Fosca's fiercely possessive love.

Not everyone will be willing to go there. Yes, this is a story about the transforming power of love, but it's a fearsome love -- an emotion so powerful that it can bore itself into you even if you resist it. Sondheim and Lapine almost dare you to believe it. But if you give yourself over, you might find yourself feeling as Giorgio does when he sings: "I don't know how I let you / So far inside my mind, / But there you are, and there you will stay. / How could I ever wish you away?"

*

'Passion'

Where: East West Players, Union Center for the Arts, 120 Judge John Aiso St., downtown Los Angeles

When: Thursdays-Fridays, 8 p.m.; Saturdays, 2 and 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m.

Ends: Oct. 5

Price: \$23-\$38

Contact: (213) 625-7000, Ext. 20

Running Time: 2 hours



Los Angeles Times

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Michael Dalager...Giorgio

Linda Igarashi...Clara

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Kerry K. Carnahan, Louise Marie Cornillez, Bonifacio Deoso Jr., Dexter Echiverri, Randy Guiaya, Lito Villareal, Paul Wong...Others

Presented by East West Players. Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Book by James Lapine. Director Tim Dang. Musical director Scott Nagatani. Set Victoria Petrovich. Costumes Naomi Yoshida Rodriguez. Lights Jose Lopez. Production stage manager Ricardo Figueroa.



Daryl H. Miller

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Daryl H. Miller has been besotted with the arts since age 5, once he was old enough to sing with the church youth choir, and has yet to top the thrill of portraying Billy Bigelow in his rural high school's production of "Carousel." He has been covering the arts in Southern California for three decades for the Los Angeles Times, Daily News, LA Weekly, Orange County Register and other publications. He is also a copy editor.

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