Seismic Shifts of the Heart

The subtleties of Haruki Murakami’s stories don’t always come through onstage.

By Kerry Reid

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fter a year filled with tsunamis, hurricanes, and earthquakes, you might understandably look for insight to Japanese writer Haruki Murakami’s After the Quake, a lovely collection of short stories about life after the 1995 Kobe disaster, which claimed more than 5,000 lives. But Murakami’s six tales don’t deal with epic calamities or their political implications—instead they focus on the quiet aches and nameless fears that put pressure on the tectonic plates of the heart. For this Steppenwolf Theatre Company world premiere, adapter-director Frank Galati combines two of the stories in Murakami’s 2002 book. In “Honey Pie”, a lonely writer, Junpei, still loves a woman he met in college, Sayoko, who married his best friend instead. When her daughter, Sala, suffers nightmares after the quake, Sayoko asks Junpei for help, and he makes up stories about a clever bear to calm the little girl. Galati’s invention is to make the second tale, “Super-Frog Saves Tokyo,” part of Junpei’s story within a story, as the six-foot amphibi reads them. Nobody gains insight into themselves, the play sings. But when their realizations are simply explained to the audience, a vaguely homiletic tone underlines the drama. Still, After the Quake can be charming and affecting. Andre Plaus and Ben Sussman’s score, played live on cello and koto by Jason McDermott and Jeff Wichmann, gives the love triangle poignancy. As Super-Frog, Keong Sim is both comic and commanding in his goggles and knobby green gloves, and he’s well balanced by Pang, who also plays the nerdish, driven bank officer. James F. Ingalls lights James Schuette’s set, a simple curved wall of horizontal gray slats, with dreamy evocativeness. And Galati offers an intelligent, respectful take on Murakami’s tales. What’s missing is a sense of urgency in the characters, the drive to overcome past mistakes and current catastrophes through the force of imagination and human connection.
The 2004 election is more controversial than ever.

**SPANKING THE DONKEY: DISPATCHES FROM THE DUMB SEASON** | Matt Taibbi
Comparisons between New York Press columnist Matt Taibbi and Hunter S. Thompson have never been a stretch—as cofounder of the infamous expat tabloid the Exile, Taibbi covered roaring-90s Russia just the way the old man might have, with opportunistic delight and an enthusiastically jaundiced eye. But his new book, a Four and Loathing for our times, should make the connection stick.

Spanking the Donkey is a post-mortem on the Democratic campaign-trail failures that led to the retention of George W. Bush in ‘04, and read simply as history it’s painfully educational. But as a guide to what the whole dysfunctional electoral process may really be designed to accomplish, it could be invaluable.

“The presidential election, as presented by the media, is a great tour de force of lies,” says Taibbi, “a kind of ritualistic piece of theater held exclusively for the consumption of upper-middle-class white people, for use in legitimizing a political process the rest of the country knows instinctively is a bunch of crap.” The son of longtime network correspondent Mike Taibbi, Matt Taibbi was a member of the press pool following Dean, and then Kerry, writing for both the NYP and Rolling Stone, and his credentials as a rogue insider ring true.

Starting with the gross media undercounts of the massive antiwar demonstrations of January 2003—the largest since Vietnam—Taibbi suggests the press corps hasn’t just been asleep at the wheel but actually complicit in the dumb show that’s got us in the fix we’re in today. Speechwriter, reporter, political operative, and op-ed hack all speak the same empty language, within a rarefied bubble of plane, hotel, and campaign HQ. Dark horses like Dean are set up to fall; darker ones like Kucinich are so dangerous they must be ridiculed from the get-go. While all the “drama” of the campaign trail may not be scripted, its goal must certainly be: eventually the prize must—and will—go to another stuffed shirt.

For all his chemically enhanced shenanigans—shrooming at a debate in New Hampshire, tripping in full Viking regalia amid the Kerry press pool—Taibbi’s deconstruction of the campaign trail is masterful and lucid, and his scorn for the sad attempts of the Democrats to counter Republican vituperation with their “cheap imitation of viciousness” is palpable. But analytical chops aside, Taibbi’s great strength remains his role-playing.
Taibbi’s role-playing routines take him past Uncle Gonzo and into the company of high satirists like Swift and Burroughs. Gonzo and into the company of high satirists like Swift and Burroughs. Whether fantasizing about ruling a backwater in the future American empire or pitching two inches to a four-inch incision. Unlike many a handwringing, Taibbi’s willing to engage the opposition on a level deeper than condescension, buffoonery, or pity. And on a couple occasions, when he joins his analytic and satiric powers together—as when tranny-baiting Bush volunteers while undercover in Florida—the results are dumbfounding. –Brian Nemtusak

Taibbi’s role-playing routines take him past Uncle Gonzo and into the company of high satirists like Swift and Burroughs. Whether fantasizing about ruling a backwater in the future American empire or pitching a reality TV show called “Extreme Fascist Makeover,” he portrays the right-wing other with all the diabolical gle of Dr. Broom adding.