THE ROAD AHEAD: FROM PAGE 15

semibarbarous people," as Commodore Matthew Perry described the Japanese in his personal journal (an observation cited by The Reciter in Act I of *Pacific Overtures*).

As a way of countering this view of the Japanese as somehow inferior, Weidman and Sondheim allow us to view the events of history through the lens of those on the receiving end of imperialism's extended arm. In the original Broadway production, the entire cast was made up of Asian-Americans, who played both the Japanese and the American characters.

Commodore Perry, who never speaks in *Pacific Overtures*, is a figurehead looming over the proceedings. At the end of Act I, he performs a ceremonial dance described by Weidman in his libretto as "a strutting, leaping dance of triumph, which is a combination of the traditional Kabuki lion dance and an American cake walk." Thrillingly choreographed in Hal Prince's production by Patricia Birch, the lightness — or weight, depending on how one perceives it — of Japanese tradition, evident in the dance's free-form introduction, is conquered by the rhythmic forward motion of Sondheim's brash, brass-dominated ending as Perry, dressed in an Uncle Sam hat, bounds across the stage, ushering in a new era of international trade, for better or worse.

As the show progresses, the traditions of the Japanese, so pronounced in earlier scenes, slip away little by little until Western culture dominates in the show's finale, "Next." The denial evident in the opening song's lyrics, "kings are burning somewhere — not here!" gives way to reality in "Next," where instead the sentiment is, "Kings are burning, sift the ashes … next."

Although *Pacific Overtures* is critical of imperialism, it would be reductive to brand it a one-sided critique of the American Dream. Just as the Americans are seen by the traditional Japanese as invaders, the ruling classes eventually meet them halfway. In "A Bowler Hat," Kayama, the samurai-turned-governor, sings that one must "accommodate the times as one lives them." Speaking for Kayama, The Reciter has noted, "Of course I wish them gone, but while they remain I shall try to turn their presence into an advantage rather than a burden." Meanwhile, the fisherman-turned-samurai Manjiro, a castaway who once admired the "streets of Boston," retreats to the old ways for solace. He becomes a political dissident in the face of shifting mores, serving a traditional tea as Kayama sings of his mechanical pocket watch and cutaway.

If Weidman and Sondheim's most recent collaboration, *Road Show*, is a more obliquely political show, it nonetheless addresses both the Yukon Gold Rush at the turn of the 20th century and the subsequent Florida land boom of the 1920s — both "get rich quick" moments of enterprise and ambition in America's recent history. If *Pacific Overtures* is characterized by an adherence to and furtherance of the American Dream through imperialism and *Assassins* concerns the domestic failure of that dream, *Road Show* takes a middle path, placing at center stage two individuals' pursuits of the elusive riches at the end of a hard-won road.

The show follows two ambitious brothers, Addison and Wilson Mizner, from adolescence to the afterlife, chronicling their pinnacles and pitfalls as they attempt to pursue — and are eventually crushed by — their lofty goals.

Road Show's pointedly pessimistic opening number, "Waste," replaced the title song of *Bounce* (the show's earlier incarnation) while retaining its jaunty central melody. In it, the very punters left in Addison's wake return to speak their peace and confront the man who has trampled them in pursuit of his own piece of the American Dream. As Wilson often sings, this is just part of "the game," where chance and spectacle trump achievement. The emphasis is placed on "that moment when the card is turned and nothing is the same."

Also central to the embodiment of the American Dream in *Road Show* is the titular emphasis on traveling ahead. In "It's in Your Hands Now," Papa Mizner sings, "You'll see it through if you stay on track and you don't look back." Prior to that number, Weidman gives Papa a rousing speech on the boys' responsibility to their country and the undying work ethic of its people. "Your forefathers were given a great gift," he tells them, describing "a New World, pristine and unspoiled, in which anything was possible." But his focus is on the future. "It was my generation's task to make that New World a nation," he tells them. "Now, with the dawning of a new century, your work begins. The work of determining what type of nation we shall be."

Of course, though Papa Mizner might feel differently, this state of flux and the perception of being on the cusp of something new is not unique. In fact, the United States is constantly on a road of its own, steadily reinventing itself. No matter the current state of things, there's always room for improvement; as long as the American Dream holds sway, as Wilson says in the final moments of *Road Show*, "Sooner or later we're bound to get it right." Such is the underlying concept of our democratic ideals, right down to our election process.

While the promise that the American Dream offers can be shown as one of the nation's greatest strengths, it is also one of its greatest responsibilities. This is the fine line Sondheim and Weidman have explored in their three collaborations. They have consistently explored the appeal of the American Dream to their characters — Japanese fishermen, political assassins and 20th-century pioneers. As Wilson Mizner says, "in America, the journey *is* the destination." What Sondheim and Weidman understand is that that same seemingly unending journey is rarely clear-cut and never devoid of drama. |TSR|

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