

History Lessons, With Song and Dance

Year One of the Empire

NYT Critic's Pick

Off Off Broadway, Comedy/Drama, Drama

Metropolitan Playhouse, 220 E. Fourth St.

800-838-3006

By Wilborn Hampton

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Before the start of “Year One of the Empire,” the cast assembles onstage and sings “The Star-Spangled Banner.” At the end of the anthem you half expect an umpire to shout, “Play ball!” What follows, however, is an enlightening, entertaining and at times engrossing dramatized survey of America’s coming of imperialistic age at the turn of the 20th century.

The play, by Elinor Fuchs and Joyce Antler, and staged by Metropolitan Playhouse, makes it clear that the country’s politicians and generals haven’t learned a lot in the last hundred years.



Michael Hardart in Elinor Fuchs and Joyce Antler’s “Year One of the Empire.” Credit...Tracy Lantz

Written at the height of the national anguish over the Vietnam War and published in 1973, “Empire” begins with an account of American expansion in the Caribbean and Pacific under President William McKinley, following the sinking of the U.S.S. Maine in 1898 and the war with Spain. In quick succession, the United States annexed Hawaii, Puerto Rico and Guam and paid Spain \$20 million for the Philippines.

The ensuing two acts recount the bitter Senate fight over a peace treaty that gave the Philippines to the United States, and pitted Andrew Carnegie and the Anti-Imperialist

League against those who saw American expansion as a “moral mandate,” and a Senate investigation into charges that American soldiers committed atrocities against ordinary Filipinos in fighting an insurgency there. The Senate debate is eerily similar to those conducted over the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution and, more recently, the invasion of Iraq. The hearings hauntingly echo those that followed My Lai and Abu Ghraib.

Ms. Fuchs, a professor of dramaturgy, and Ms. Antler, a professor of American studies, took their material from documents of the time, and the Senate debates can take on the tediousness of, well, a Senate debate. The play is not without comic relief, however, even beyond the inherent inanities of politicians and pundits, and there are period songs and dancing, reminiscent of those in Joan Littlewood’s “Oh! What a Lovely War.” The direction by Alex Roe, who at one recent performance stepped in for an indisposed cast member and performed admirably, keeps the action flowing smoothly.

A fine cast of 10 plays more than 40 different characters and makes each one distinct. Michael Durkin is splendid as President McKinley and a bartender named Dooley, among other roles, and Michael Hardart is bully as Teddy Roosevelt. David Patrick Ford, Gregory Jones, John Tobias and J. M. McDonough are all excellent in a variety of roles.