

MAY 26 - JUNE 1, 2004 • VOL. XLIX NO. 21 • AMERICA'S LARGEST WEEKLY NEWSPAPER

the village **VOICE**

Lake poets get drenched in Soho Rep's madcap burlesque



Photograph by David Gochfeld

Maggie Hoffman and James Stanley

THE APPEAL
By Young Jean Lee
Soho Rep
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ROMANTIC IDOL

BY ALEXIS SOLOSKI

There was little love lost between Lord Byron and William Wordsworth. In "Don Juan," Byron snipes that Wordsworth's verse stands "of all but childish prattle void" and declares with liturgical pomp, "Thou shalt believe in Milton, Dryden, Pope;/Thou shalt not set up Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey." Wordsworth, in turn, blamed Byron's faulty taste on lunacy. He took a breather from his clouds and daffodils to pen that Byron "is insane and will probably end his career in a madhouse." Yet Young Jean Lee's amiable burlesque *The Appeal* finds the two chummy in the Alps, drinking sherry and exchanging pleasantries. Diarist Dorothy Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge complete the party.

In Lee's world of casual diction, the writers greet each other with "Hi Wordsworth" and "Hi Dorothy, my sister." When less amiable, they salute with "OK, dummy" or "You're a total and complete fucking moron." It's unexpectedly refreshing to hear the Lake poets exchange schoolyard insults and droll to watch them spike their tea with opium and masturbate furiously upon the very desks where they compose. In perhaps the most extreme example of poetic license, the clubfooted Byron seduces Dorothy with a *Riverdance* routine.

The actors, under Lee's direction, have a very jolly time with their liberal interpretations. Michael Portnoy's Coleridge mopes exceptionally, pausing to deliver a scat/chantey version of "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," which includes the line, "So then the ancient mariner said, Yar! Ahoy!" As Wordsworth, hunky Pete Simpson swans

about in a billowy shirt and a pair of pants tight enough to nearly make you remember the *Lyrical Ballads* as sort of hot. (They aren't.) Maggie Hoffman brings Cupid's bow and lively eyes to Dorothy's fair-haired passivity while the slim, aristocratic James Stanley plays Byron without a bit of the pudgy he was inclined to and has the pleasure of reciting "Ching Chong Chinaman," a verse he claims as his own.

This irreverence is reflected in the design. Rock duo Matmos, who supply the soundtrack, offer not "the still, sad music of humanity" but a rather cheerful melange of melody and odd percussion (I believe a cowbell and glockenspiel feature). Radiohole alum Eric Dyer provides a suitably skewed set, replete with pink moldings and plywood floor. Tara Webb's costumes, bits of velvet, frock coats, and an unforgivable turban, are insouciant and sexy.

Admittedly, the play itself is slight and somewhat jejune. It runs just over an hour and any attempt at a discussion of poetic creation or artistic temperament quickly dissolves into jokes. Yet if *The Appeal* can be read as a prelude, it signals delightful things to come.