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Theater review: *Stone* (04.20.05)

Hard Rock

by Amanda Walker

Lost Nation Theater's *Stone* is carved from a mountain of primary sources. Working from original interviews with Barre's early granite workers found in Mari Tomasi and Roaldus Richmond's book *Men Against Granite*, Artistic Director Kim Bent has created a collage of stories and voices, intermingled with strains of live music.

From the play's opening monologue by stonecutter Elia Corti, performed by Hannibal Hill and set to the haunting Italian tune "Torna a Surriento" ("Return to Sorrento"), it is clear that turning these historical documents into living theater was a work of love. But it was also a lot of work, and the results are uneven. Some scenes convey beautiful, subtle moments, some seem unnecessary, and others appear to carry the full weight of the granite that inspired the production.

The experience actually begins before the Corti scene. Musicians Adam Boyce, John Moward and Steve Nasuta greet the audience as they arrive in the foyer with traditional tunes taken from the cultural melting pot of early-20th-century Barre. The three-dimensional background of Robert W. Wolff's towering, earth-toned set represents the sheer rock face of the Barre quarry. John Paul Devlin's atmospheric lighting immediately conveys a sense of the site's magnitude. Rising high above both audience and players, the set reinforces the script's frequent references to the grand scale of quarrying and the dangers of working with heavy stone at great heights.

In the playbill Bent states, "I hope the experience of seeing *Stone* will inspire many people to delve into these and other sources, because the record is vast, fascinating and highly detailed. Our production offers merely a hint of the wealth of information available." Photos projected on two screens flanking the set provide glimpses into that history. The authentic images of work in the sheds and the quarry, and of monuments created by the stone workers, remind the audience that the characters are based on real people and lend power to their individual voices.

The intermixing of music, image and live performance is particularly effective as the ensemble tells narrator Corti's story of how he crafted the Robert Burns statue that remains a fixture in Barre today. In the hands of Bent and his crew, a point in the road that modern drivers easily bypass is transformed into a focal point. This tangible remnant of Barre's past is a hefty symbol in which competing forces converge: the glory of the stonecutters' craft, the tragedy of Corti's early death and the national pride of the first quarry workers -- Scottish immigrants from the quarrying region near Aberdeen.

But the Burns statue story is just one of many that make up *Stone*. Mindful of Barre's cultural diversity circa 1940, the script includes upwards of 70 characters played by an energetic ensemble of 16, including the voices of many nationalities -- Italian, Irish, Scottish, French Canadian, Swedish and Spanish -- each one outfitted in a distinct, authentic garment created by Cora Fauser.

Ultimately, however, the production tries to do too much. With several dozen characters to keep track of, it fails to engage the audience consistently in the granite workers' lives in meaningful or memorable ways. And because the script sticks so closely to the original sources, it can sometimes feel like a history lesson. Many of the actors are unable to create three-dimensional performances for each character, often mixing dialects and gestures when playing multiple roles. This adds to the confusion and further distances the audience from the stories. Although Bent can't be faulted for trying to recreate Barre's culturally diverse, poly-vocal community, this multitude of characters, paired with the performers' limitations and the lack of good dramatic writing, results in a production that falls short of its potential.

Several of the cast members do deserve mention. John Alexander moves between characters with great agility. His solid physique lends itself to the role of stone worker, while his rich voice and charismatic nature make him equally convincing as Mayor Duncan.

Mary Wheeler is arresting in her portrayal of the wealthy Mrs. Wheaton, one of the first upper-class characters to emerge in the play's social landscape. Her deportment and speech insist on your attention, and she makes her character's story immediate and personal. Wheeler also gives a standout performance as an Italian widow who runs a restaurant in her home. She's so convincing that you might detect perspiration on her brow from the hours spent over a hot oven making ravioli for state employees from Montpelier.

Stone is an adventurous, original play that still feels like a work in progress. Lost Nation deserves applause for tackling a monumental and worthwhile challenge, and for engaging the community in its rich, varied history. It also deserves all the encouragement and comments audiences can give to help shape and polish the fine monument still waiting to emerge from *Stone*.