



## A *CurtainUp* Review

### *Kaspar Hauser: a foundling's opera*

By Elyse Sommer

*Here lies Kaspar Hauser, riddle of his time. His birth was unknown, his death mysterious.—Words on a headstone in the country graveyard where Kaspar Hauser, the ever mysterious German wild child, was buried.*



From Left to Right: Preston Martin and Marshall York in *Kaspar Hauser*  
(Photo Credit: Ryan Jensen)

As the gravestone from which the quote at the top of this review was taken proves, there really was a man named Kaspar Hauser. And this semi-mute's mysterious appearance in Nuremberg, Germany early in the 19th century and his equally mysterious murder not only made him "the riddle of his time", but has continued to puzzle scholars and inspire writers and artists.

The German film maker Werner Herzog brought the fable of this Everyman/wild child to impressive dramatic life in *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (1975). Other writers much taken with the story included Herman Melville (*Billy Budd* and *The Confidence-Man* both made reference to Kaspar); the Austrian playwright Peter Handke (*Kaspar*, 1967); novelist and short story writer Stephen Millhauser ("Kaspar Speaks" appeared in a collection of stories published as *The Knife Thrower* in 1998); poet Lucie Brock-Broido ("Self-Portrait as Kaspar Hauser" published in a 2004 collection entitled *Trouble in Mind*). Last year there was even a graphic novel, *Kaspar* by Diane Obomsawin.

The musical possibilities of this 19th century celebrity story and the questions it raises about good and evil, and about who we are and where we come from have also been explored. One of the best known Kaspar inspired songs is "Wooden Horse" by Suzanne Vega, its title referring to what was said to be Kaspar Hauser's only toy and the motivation for his wanting to be a "ryder" [sic] like his unknown father. It was only a matter of time for someone to write not just a song but a whole musical about this compelling figure. The wait for this to happen is now over. Composer Elizabeth Swados and playwright Erin Courtney have created a musical theater piece that's well worth waiting for.

As my introductory comments indicate, Swados and Courtney are not the first to use the Kaspar Hauser story as a creative wellspring, but what they've created is both original and exciting. Swados, whose orientation is strictly musical and Courtney, who is accustomed to writing dialogue rather than lyrics, prove to be a fine match. The music of their almost completely sung-through collaboration is operatic but with a propulsive rock sensibility or as Swados herself describes it, "somewhere between Beethoven and Queen." The lyrics, as one might expect given that they're penned by a playwright, are unrhymed but succeed in moving the story forward.

Call it an opera, a popera or a Weill-Brechtian fantasia, *Kaspar Hauser* is sung and performed with enormous verve by nineteen members of the best resident artist company in town, the Flea Theater's Bats. They bring the at times feverish swirl of Kaspar's tragic story to vivid life. Their committed performances compensate for the show's failure to deliver the sort of memorably melodic arias that might lead to a longer, more commercial run.

The Flea's Main Stage has been configured to make the connection between audience and actors even closer than usual. There are just three wide rows of seats, each slightly raised. The stage itself is wide but shallow so that the numerous large ensemble scenes evoke the flavor of a crowded town square. While ensemble scenes predominate, the stage is initially occupied by a single actor, the 14-year-old title character (the mesmerizing and incredibly touching Preston Martin). He's in chains, his eyes are glazed and empty and he's fixated on rolling a toy horse back and forth. Those glazed eyes and the intense, monotonous movement of that tiny prop create an instant portrait of the wild child whose story we're about to experience.

John McDermott scenic design features mostly dark wooden scaffolding that includes a platform at either side of the stage-- one side for Kaspar's real mother (Eliza Poehlman) and the other for her stepsister (Beth Griffith), the villainess of the piece who schemed to have her sister's child spirited away and incarcerated so her own baby boy could succeed to the royal throne of Baden. These two pivotal characters reappear throughout the ninety intermissionless minutes.

After his jailer, identified only as The Man (Chad Lindsey), unchains Kaspar, forces a pair of boots on his feet and sends him, barely able to walk, into the streets of Nuremburg with instructions to tell people "I would like to be a ryder[as in rider] /Like my father was before me." This leads to Kaspar's trajectory —from being a curiosity and, upon being taught to walk and talk by the kindly Professor Daumler (Nicolas Greco) and his mother (Amy Jackson), becoming a beloved celebrity. The towns people champion him and promise to keep him safe:

*He is each mother's heartbreak.  
He is each father's son  
He is our nation's conscience.  
He is the abandoned one.  
Now that the world has found you.  
Who could push you away.  
We will protect and nurture you  
And the abuser will pay.*

But wait. . .this is a tragedy with an inevitable operatic ending, so Kaspar is persuaded to leave Nuremburg by his evil aunt's friend Lord Stanhope (Marshall York). Stanhope reneges on his promise to adopt Kaspar and turns him over to two new and Dickensian tutors (Adrienne Deckmann and Michael Hopewell) who set out to put an end to his being a handsomely dressed "Prince of Nuremburg" and teach him Christian virtues.

No doubt the moral issues inherent in Kaspar Hauser's short and tragic life drew the always socially conscious Ms. Swados to this project. Abetted by Ms. Courtney, and the ability of this talented young cast to portray both good and evil characters, *Kaspar Hauser: a foundling's opera* makes us think even as it entertains us. Does the ruthless royal sister represent the really great evil men can do and have done? Is Kaspar the innocent Billy Budd/Christlike figure who can bring out the best and worst in us? Are the good people of Nuremburg and the nasty Meyers of Ansbach representative of the much discussed good and bad Germans of the Holocaust era?

As for the show's entertainment value. . .besides the already praised Bats, bravos to the five piece orchestra tucked behind the wicked Louisa's balcony. Bravos too for Normandy Sherwood's colorful costumes, Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew's lighting and Movement Director Mimi Quillin who makes the stage at times literally shake. Swados, who also directs, accompanies her music with some gorgeous, painterly images, including a finale that I'll leave it to you to discover for yourself.

Swados and Courtney no more solve the mystery of who Kaspar Hauser was than others who have attempted to do so, but they do make him a universal figure:

*He lived among us, he was Europe's child.  
His ways were simple, and his manner mild.  
We looked beyond him and saw what we chose to see,  
And now the truth about him, stays a mystery.*

At \$25 (general seating, with not a bad seat anywhere), I dare you to find a better bang for your economy squeezed buck.