

PLAY: "Off Stage: The East Village Fragments"

Posted by Aaron Riccio

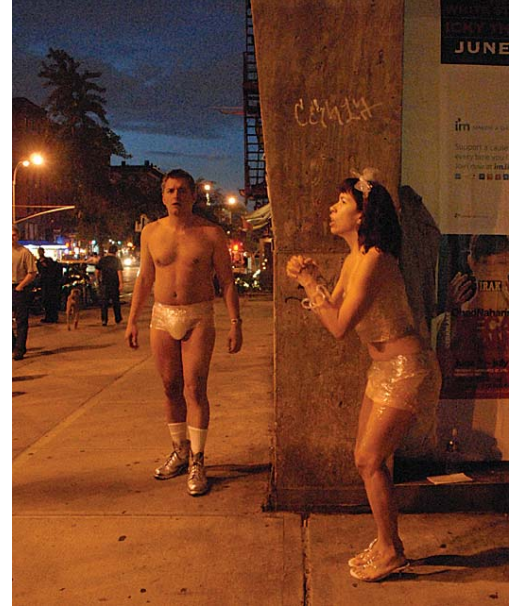
I take it that all of you reading this are theater fans; that said, why haven't you already seen *Off Stage: The East Village Fragments*? Peculiar Works Project, following up on their West Village version, has put together a historical homage, a walking-tour-de-force, of off-off-Broadway '60s plays (surreal, abstract, absurd, experimental, classical, satirical, happening) to help pass on the culture and teach us all more about the state of theater today. I saw a lot of glimmering talent in all those styles and performances, and I hope there are some producers out there who realize that this type of concentrated festival can do as much good, if not more, than a full-length summer series (if for no other reason than it being outside in the beautiful New York summer). I missed the West Village version because I didn't know about it: if you've read this far, you can't use that excuse. From *The Public* to *La MaMa*, it's time to really put the pieces together.

With this celebratory collage, a patchwork of 80 actors, 22 directors, and a dozen theatrical landmarks that is anything but threadbare, the Peculiar Works Project makes the chronicling of off-off-Broadway into an exciting evening walking tour. Site-specific performances throw hay, rugs, beds, chairs, and whatever else they can find at the audience to wake up the culture of the booming '60s and the rise of *La MaMa* (among others). Experimental, wild, creative pieces abound, and the atmosphere of the sultry city only adds to the mix as you realize that anybody walking down the street could be the next show.

While the project is meant to enrich the public (which it does), it also serves a second purpose for those producers bold enough to venture below Fourteenth. There's some popular pieces, like an excerpt from the musical "Hair," Jean Genet's oft-appearing "The Maids," and offerings from staples like Sam Shepard (the sexed up "The Rock Garden") and Israel Horowitz (the aggressive "The Indian Wants the Bronx"). But there are also tons of rediscovered works, like Michael McGrinder's "The Foreigners" (the disconnect of language), Leonard Melfi's sweet "Birdbath," Jean-Claude Van Itallie's brilliant satire, "America Hurrah!" (as accurate about politicians now as it was in '65), or Robert Patrick's five-minute masterpiece, "Camera Obscura." It's a veritable pupu platter of delectable and theatrical morsels. And even if a few give cause for indigestion, you'll quickly be walking it off en route to the next "stage."

In addition to the historical annotations crammed into the program, *East Village Fragments* also provides audiences with immediate visualizations for different styles of theater, not to mention the ways in which directors can give life to a text, as with Casey McLain's row of flashlight illuminated women in "The Mulberry Bush," Belinda Mello's intimate proximity of the cast in "A Corner of a Morning," or the way Halina Ujda turns a narrow street into the final walk on death row in "Lullaby for a Dying Man." The creativity occasionally bleeds into confusion, as with the absurd "The Conquest of the Universe (or When Queens Collide)," which, in order to pay respect to the two visions that split the play into two theaters, has two casts and directors working at the same time. It's a valuable lesson in what the Playhouse of the Ridiculous was all about, and a nice compliment to the Theater of the Absurd parody (which is, by nature, just as absurd), "The Bundle Man."

Not that anyone's judging, especially this critic. The *East Village Fragments* is meant to be experienced as a whole, and given that, the only thing this two-and-a-half hour, literal tour-de-force is missing is a bathroom break. Aside from that, I think you'll find that even the theatrical equivalent of the kitchen sink is represented here, from interstitial mini-happenings to musical segues to gibberish poetic rants, and, of course, the city itself. Whether you'll like it is almost beside the point; suffice to say the meal's been well-prepared. You have to taste it for yourself.



Richard Sheinmel and Debbie Troché
in Robert Patrick's "Camera Obscura."
Photo/Jim Baldassare