

MARC ROBINSON

THE MIND KING ABDICATES

Despite its caffeinated title, the characters' libidinal bluster and short attention spans, and the violence cresting and subsiding so regularly it tears at the very seams of the stage, Richard Foreman's new production, *Panic! (How to Be Happy!)*, is most compelling when seen as a study of immobility. The four main actors—two women, one dressed in black and the other in white, and two men, one speaking in falsetto and the other in a low growl—embody the war of alternatives inhibiting all decisive action and thought in their world. Balance, here, doesn't foster well-being. Instead, it arrests at their highest intensity numerous pairs of irreconcilable longings. Sexual obsession vies with revul-



Robert Cucuzza, Tea Alagic, D. J. Mendel, and Elina Löwensohn in Richard Foreman's *Panic! (How to Be Happy!)* at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, New York, 2003. Photo: Manuel Igrejas

sion. Spiritual seeking pulls against secular cynicism. Enthusiasm for the future can't triumph over preoccupation with the past. Unselfconsciousness is forever deferred by these pendulum swings in mood, if not permanently squelched by the characters' analytical habits. They recoil from their every act to judge it, unable to resist contemplating all the options they didn't choose. The panic envisioned in the title would be a relief. Characters could then release their pent-up energies until they're

spent—learning, at last, “how to be happy.” Yet the few times they do break loose, they abruptly reassert the kind of decorum peculiar to the Ontological-Hysteric Theater—in this production, one character's lazy-eyed anomie, another's impacted resentment, a third's tightly wound cheerfulness.

This picture of violent ambivalence furthers an argument Foreman has been waging with himself ever since *Pearls for Pigs* (1997). There, he wondered openly whether his familiar solipsism was losing its ability to nourish him. No longer was it reliably steering him to knowledge buried beneath mere self-awareness, he implied, or causing epiphanies about matters beyond the self altogether. The mental transcendence he sought was coming into ever greater conflict with the body's more pressing, less exalted demands. This crisis was dramatically enthralling, as were the efforts to escape the self by abasing, fracturing, and dispersing it or renouncing the scene of its crisis—the theater—altogether.

Now Foreman seems to plunge deeper into doubt, rather than fretting over its symptoms or searching for what, in another play, he called “the cure.” *Panic!* is among his most claustrophobic works. None of many onstage exits leads anywhere except deeper into the same setting. These spaces—a confessional-like cabinet, a hideaway behind an upstage flat, two inner sanctums, and a pair of theater boxes above the stage—match the recesses and compartments of a mind tormented by its own ingenuity. Like the actors moving through these stages-within-stages, thought itself moves through an argument, only to find it hasn't gone anywhere except deeper into its first idea. “He goes where no man has dared to go” are the hopeful opening words of *Panic!* But the promise of such adventurousness pales with the second line, “I shall not enter this tomb,” and grows ever fainter until, by the end, the characters are mentally paralyzed, destinations rather than travelers: “That thing entering the room,”

says a voice at the end, referring to an anthropomorphic object that could just as easily be another idea or emotion. “I forget what to name it, but I’d better think fast.”

The play’s inwardness derives from more than just this narrative of creeping passivity. Almost all the text, like that of *Permanent Brain Damage* (1995), is spoken by Foreman himself, in ominous voice-overs that blanket the stage like fog or (in deliberate mockery of their own heaviness) in high a cappella chant—existential plainsong. He speaks from within a deep solitude, resigned to its privations when not actively rebuffing the attentions of others. “Never show true feelings to people hungry for mutual affectionate behavior,” he says. “Nobody can be somebody’s spiritual helpmate.” Foreman seems to choose self-reliance only because other kinds of kinship have proved illusory or disappointing or been lost as he hesitated over their cost. When this Foreman declares that “I already love myself” or that “I can choose my own private direction,” the familiar sentiments sound new because they are voiced against threats to his autonomy or, more often, in the wake of a general renunciation of an external world that has betrayed him.

It’s hard to tell which is stronger, paranoia or self-righteousness or simple bitterness at the failure of art to rescue him from life. He speaks of his “enemies,” warns himself to be “careful,” since “here come the men who change everything.” He reconceives his long-standing spiritual discipline so that now he “worship[s]” only “through increasing distance.” Even that faith is in doubt. The Foreman who, in many previous productions, could be counted on to make visible a god of one kind or another—a big, unmysterious contraption of boards and paint, usually childlike or grotesque, but nonetheless present—now warns that “those who sink tried to walk on water.” When disappointment in the superhuman is this severe, vanity (Foreman’s word) is merely reassuring and pragmatic.

Despite this play’s air of disillusion-



Panic! (How to Be Happy!). Photo: Manuel Igréjas

ment, Foreman still seems to fear a sudden eruption of passion, and so he presses down on his onstage surrogates, as if disciplining animals he doesn’t trust to have been tamed. Foreman writes, “My mouth is sealed with gold,” and throughout the production he works variations on such bondage. The main actors (Tea Alagic, Robert Cucuzza, Elina Löwensohn, and D. J. Mendel) are dressed in multiple layers of clothing, burying whatever natural selves they have under disguises as heterogeneous as their character names. Nikos wears a fur vest over a T-shirt over yet another shirt as well as, later, a skirt on top of his pants. Umberto struts and preens in courtier’s feathers, doublet, brocade, and buckles. Luminitza herself is a riot of textures and patterns: lace, paisley, velvet, and silk. Svetlana wears a baby-doll dress over long johns, and a hat covered with Ping-Pong balls. Everyone wears some form of headdress, as if Foreman were clamping down on thought itself. With the most menacing of the characters, Nikos, Foreman takes extra precautions, binding his arms with tape to keep his muscles in line.

No use. Desire’s volcanic force begins pushing against the play’s inwardness early when Foreman says, “Kiss me, kiss me, when I am most ruined, inside myself.” Soon, this need intensifies, spiking like a fever and then running out of control, as orality in all its forms threatens to wreak havoc. In the first scene, a woman lick-



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ing a sword makes clear the double-edged nature of all subsequent hunger. When two characters kiss, they seem to bruise their lips and break their teeth. Others lick ice-cream cones that immediately slip from their hands. A man doubles over and retches after eating a pastry. Lust turns ludicrous when the men bury their faces in huge prop vaginas, half the size of the women holding them, only to be whipped and rendered so weak they can't emerge from the objects of their desire. (They stagger around the stage with the genitalia sitting on their heads like vaguely Alpine hats.) The chorus of stagehands displays the only uncomplicated penetration in the production: They are multiply pierced with nose rings, lower-lip studs, and eyebrow staples and in their indifference recommend the proper response to other kinds of violation.

Indeed, such affectlessness quickly drains every action, however bold, of its power. The women protagonists pick lint from their hair during the scenes of oral sex. They humorlessly grind phallic objects into their partners. After thrusting once against the men, they push them to the floor. Despite the grimness of Foreman's vision of sexuality—his male surrogates yearning for shame and submitting to humiliation—there's no nadir to the abjection and certainly no sense that self-sacrifice will lead to absolution, purification, or the relief of oblivion. Far from it: The bodies are still intact, unchanged

despite the masochism, as if their greatest torment is their own resilience. That sense of an all-enveloping, smothering stasis, undisturbed even by repeated acts of aggression, is more alarming than the aggression itself. Foreman is always reminding himself that tranquility won't be consoling ("This, no end of trouble, is my safe harbor," says the Voice), and that it can't protect him from the agony of uncertainty ("This paradise is half and half objectionable"). Mere seeing—the gentlest, most discreet mode of contact—is painful: When characters look through a Plexiglas disc at the front of the stage, a flash of light momentarily blinds them. Yet they keep coming back, only to be shocked again, covering their eyes and stumbling in almost the same pattern.

Is this what Foreman means when, in the text and a program note, he speaks of being "here now, inside the behavioral center"? There was a time in Foreman's career when such a condition would be desirable, the individual so intimate with his emotional and physical impulses that he doesn't siphon off their vitality with either anticipation or retrospective judgment. In *The Cure* (1986), Foreman went even further, recommending that one stay so deep within this "behavioral center" that one never actually follows through on any desire for fear of diluting it. Actions only compromise intentions, he argued in that play. Its characters struggled not to betray the memory of their glittering, ideal wishes with the banal reality of their fulfillment.

Panic! also resists development. Like all Foreman, it repeats itself, idles, leaps forward only to leap backward—the verbal and gestural equivalents of the loops of music wreathing the action. But now such circularity seems less a choice than a stoic acquiescence to reality, a comment perhaps on the fading of an ideal that once promised deliverance. With bracing candor, Foreman admits that he no longer knows what he would be delivered to. The vision of utopia he has variously termed "Paradise

Hotel,” “Poetry City,” and (in an uncut draft of *Permanent Brain Damage*) “the room of radios” is here deliberately obscured by “the paraphernalia of my youth,” the “entire world [of] memories,” the “old patterns,” and “redundant behavior.” Obsession with the past isn’t the only habit blunting perception. The future, he confesses, is even less alive. Several times in *Panic!* a board appears on which are pasted desiccated, vaguely excremental shapes. “Here’s tomorrow’s baked goods,” the voice announces helpfully, “stale already.”

This is the dark side of Gertrude Stein’s continuous present—more purgatory than paradise. Here, his characters can neither sustain contact with others, nor realize any goals. Yet they are no more reliably narcissistic. Near the end, when a gingerbread house appears, they reach for the lollipops and ice-cream cones covering its roof, ignoring the little mirrors on sticks next to them. Death itself, always a taunting presence in Foreman’s theater, can’t touch them. It hovers over—but never descends upon—the room in the shape of a vulture, hanging so far upstage it’s easy to miss. Fear, despair, anxiety: the typical Foreman emotions barely surface in *Panic!*, if at all. The most affecting response comes from an inanimate figure—a massive head looking like the Old Man in the Mountain, whose sadness is marked by a single large tear painted on his cheek. Ignoring such pathos, the living actors take their cue from the many Victorian dolls with glazed eyes hanging around the stage, impervious to all disturbances. Death’s inevitability doesn’t affect them because they’ve never been alive.

These portraits attest to the severity of Foreman’s judgment on “unavoidably frustrated effort and desire” (as he writes in the program). In other plays, the “effort” wouldn’t have seemed so routine and pessimistic, and the reaction to its failure so weak and unsurprised. Foreman’s honesty has unexpected consequences. *Panic!*, in the end, isn’t as satisfying as other recent Ontological productions—a result, I

think, of dramatizing fatigue itself, staging a battle for self-mastery while at the same time conceding that it was lost long ago. Reviewers of *Panic!* have praised the acting for, among other things, its “noncommittal quality” and “impassivity” (as the *Village Voice*’s Michael Feingold calls it), so unlike the “masked emotional depth” of previous performers. The change is indeed striking, but to me it’s regrettable. Seasoned as this cast is, it never projects what one would call charm, if that word didn’t sound inappropriate to a theater that refuses to pander to its audience. The best of earlier Foreman actors were opinionated and even querulous presences, not diffident, nor merely droll. They seemed knowing instead of jaded—a more active state. When they addressed us in a confidential, even conspiratorial tone, they were genuinely fascinated by their condition. They joined us in marveling at their landscape, puzzling out their text, and occasionally even looking dubiously upon their own behavior. Inside their seeming numbness burned passionate thought, an unpredictable individuality that added poignancy to the abstractions of their dialogue. That tension was theatrically productive—there was always something that Foreman, sitting in front of them in the audience at his sound board, couldn’t control.

Here, though, the actors seem to have acquiesced to their characters’ fates too easily and completely, with the result that the theater itself, once a place for Foreman to confront life’s insults by constructing an exaggerated, compressed, and sped-up simulation of them, now becomes another place where he must suffer them.

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