

PERMANENT BRAIN DAMAGE. By Richard Foreman. Lake Ivan Performance Group, The Piano Shop, New York. 13 August 1999.

THE UNIVERSE. By Richard Foreman. St. Kneehouse, Nada, New York. 13 August 1999.

EDDIE GOES TO POETRY CITY, PART ONE. By Richard Foreman. True Comedy Theatre Company, The Piano Shop, New York. 14 August 1999.

SAMUEL'S MAJOR PROBLEMS. By Richard Foreman. Crush Company, Nada, New York. 14 August 1999.

MISS UNIVERSAL HAPPINESS. By Richard Foreman. Gemini Collisionworks, Nada, New York. 14 August 1999.

For many theatregoers, the thought of Richard Foreman's plays immediately summons up not words, plots, or characters, but visual images from Foreman's productions. The plays have come to seem inseparable from the brightly lit, densely decorated spaces Foreman designed for them—those intensely resonating boxes of visual energy that frustrate the spectator's attempts to find a point of repose. There are also images of Foreman's actors within those boxes, alternating tense and physically awkward stances with bursts of manic energy sending them into silly spins and dances, mad chases, and collisions with the walls. Although Foreman's scripts have been published for decades, giving them a literary status independent of their productions, it is easy to regard the written works as, at best, intriguing remnants of a past occasion, which are incapable, for all their stage

directions, of summoning up the dense, jarring, and delightfully surprising world of a Foreman production.

In the notes to his volumes of plays, Foreman encouraged potential directors to ignore the published stage directions and react imaginatively to the dialogue, creating new structures of meaning. This idea has been taken up by the vibrant off-off-Broadway producing company, *Todo con Nada*, which based its three summer seasons of Foreman festivals on the assumption that directors can and should respond to the challenges of Foreman's richly imaginative texts. This season included fourteen productions, ranging from the 1966 Broadway-option *Harry in Love* to the 1997 popular success, *Benita Canova*—an ambitious retrospective that makes the much-lauded backward glances of the Signature Theatre pale in comparison. The 1999 festival not only provided a valuable opportunity to revisit favorite Foreman plays and consider them side by side, but also to encounter Foreman in the theatre without his directorial presence. The results were varied and intriguing.

Some productions made me long to see Foreman back in control. Both David Vining's *The Universe* and Christopher J. Rushton's *Samuel's Major Problems*, marked by murky lighting, ominous music, and moments of modern dance, sank the plays in undifferentiated washes of angst. In *The Universe*, a young man and woman were made objects of research by a mute cyclopean figure whom they could never see and a disembodied voice coming over a loudspeaker. The play's dialogue, used for little but the uninterrupted expression of an anxious subtext, quickly became tedious, especially in Karen Grenke's hyperventilated performance. In *Samuel's Major Problems*, the delivery was cooler, but no less paranoid, as the protagonist was teased and taunted by two party guests who mysteriously changed into a sinister doctor and femme fatale nurse. From its preshow sound loop of ominous phrases from Stravinsky's *Firebird* to the final image of Samuel sitting on the floor, his head slumped forward, the production was a gloomy, Maeterlinckian meditation on the coming of death. In both productions, Foreman appeared less an innovator than an epigone of early twentieth-century European art theatre. Vining and Rushton turned their backs on Foreman's theoretical writing and production techniques, only to sink into the portentous gloom of Symbolist drama.

Both productions foregrounded a part of Foreman's artistic background—the paranoiac, countercultural art of the late 1960s, composed of equal parts Strindberg, Kafka, and Ken Kesey. However,

making the dominant dynamics of both plays the persecution of fundamentally normal people by aberrant figures moving in shadowy environments, the plays oversimplified the texts. For if one part of the typical Foreman hero is Kafka's Joseph K., another is Lewis Carroll's Alice, fascinated by the strangeness of consciousness, physicality, and perception. This fascinating strangeness of daily life, so brilliantly recorded by Foreman, was reduced by these two productions to the clichéd weirdness of paranoid fantasizing.

Happily, Yolanda Hawkins's approach to *Eddie Goes to Poetry City, Part 1* avoided the trap of portentous gloom. The stage was brightly lit and decorated with colorful maps on paper, quilted fabric, and plastic globes, and William Niederkorn's engaging score suggested the charms of a bygone European café. The production playfully physicalized the central image of travel with the actors representing locomotives, automobiles, and airplanes. The energy and good spirits were infectious. Yet the images of stasis and absence that counterbalanced those of physical movement rarely emerged with equal clarity. This was not due to any failure of visual imagination on Hawkins's part. Her images of Eddie on the beach looking into the sun and of a radio glowing in the darkness gave a rich sense of perception hovering on the verge of poetic transcendence. But the cast, aside from the impressively intense and wittily insinuating John Hagan, tended to throw off Foreman's dialogue far too casually, thus diminishing the stakes. John Matturi's portrayal of Eddie had an attractive simplicity, but his low stage energy and conversational line delivery tended to reduce the urgency behind Eddie's poetic quest. The production admirably conveyed the play's comic charm, but left unfocused the desperation pervading it.

The lesson to be learned from these three productions is that Foreman's plays cannot be simply grave or gay; they require a carefully sustained tension between the two. Without it, the dialogue quickly loses its intellectual vigor, moment-to-moment clarity dissolves into a wash of atmospherics, and the productions become slack. When an actor allows clarity of thought to give way to preoccupation with subtext or other realistic character work, the dialogue quickly becomes close to incomprehensible.

Miss Universal Happiness successfully sustained a balance between intensity and playfulness, and kept the language clear and energized. Using the toughness and high artifice of film noir, Ian W. Hill's energetic and densely textured production showed the American Tourist (Peter Brown) and



Agnes de Garron in Lake Ivan Performance Group's production of Richard Foreman's *Permanent Brain Damage*, directed by David Silverstein. Photo: David Finkelstein.

the Prostitute and Marxist for Christ (Gita Borovsky) swagger into an acidly lit hotel room to a wail of jazz. Their performance modulated between camp posturing and troubled obsessiveness, while a white jumpsuited chorus circulated in the space outside the hotel room, providing reinforcement and disruption in turn. The opposition between noir-ish travelers and spectral chorus could easily have degenerated into the superficial paranoia of the other productions, but the relationship was energized with surprising comic reversals, as when the Prostitute tried to shoot a paper cup out of the Tourist's hand and only succeeded in leveling the chorus with her shots.

Of all the directors, Hill demonstrated the best understanding of what Foreman's staging techniques bring to his plays, and he skillfully employed some of them—shifting sound loops, abrupt changes in tempo, saturation of the visual field, tense postures, and lights focused on the audience. He also conveyed to the cast the importance of props in a Foreman production. In *Miss Universal Happiness*, more than in earlier productions, props were never mere objects at hand. Each one had a physicality and imagistic weight the performers had to engage. Peter Brown's handling of the saber, for example, slow and fascinated, was a dramatic encounter in itself.

While Hill's success (and Vising and Rushton's failures) might lead to the conclusion that a director of Foreman's plays is best served by intelligently adopting the playwright's own staging techniques, David Silverstein's approach to *Permanent Brain Damage* proved that conclusion facile. In this production, both the atmosphere and staging were more Beckettian than Foremanesque. Instead of a dense visual field, there were a few sorry strings of beads and shreds of fabric against a black background, as if one of Foreman's own sets had succumbed to exhaustion, becoming impoverished. The lighting was bright but never aggressive, and the sound loops soft and lyrical. There were no eruptions of manic behavior, only a sustained and quiet intensity.

The original production of *Permanent Brain Damage* showed Foreman at his most aggressive and despairing, with his central character climbing into a body bag, and Foreman's voice on a loudspeaker stridently singing "On the Sunny Side of the Street" off-key, conveying an angry and desperate creative impasse in the life of its creator. In this revival, Silverstein turned down the volume of the proceedings and removed any reference to the play's author. Here, Alice Teirstein and Moira Stone softly

and insistently intoned the text over microphones, with their overlapping voices often suggesting an affinity to the later work of Beckett. Silverstein replaced the central man of Foreman's production with a feminine figure. In a female impersonation utterly devoid of archness or camp, Agnes De Garron was mute and riveting. Veiled, accompanied by the sound of low, moaning winds, he entered somnambulistically, suggesting the irrational world of the gothic. Moving to a red table that held an orange tray with a red cabbage, De Garron discovered a knife, which he used to cleave the cabbage in two as the winds suddenly stopped. Immersed in bowls of clear liquid, the cabbage halves fizzed, an uncanny and Frankensteinian brain surgery that the woman seemed to perform upon herself.

As the text was spoken, De Garron went through a series of slow, fascinated encounters with hats, netting, jewelry, and plastic bags—with these feminine accouterments suggesting extensions of De Garron's own queer body. The encounters variously suggested pregnancy, childbirth, nursing, adornment, and suicide. An encounter with a green rubber snake suggested both Eve and Cleopatra, with a death-tinged eroticism as De Garron's mouth touched that of the serpent's.

Instead of Foreman's production, which suggested the investigation of a male modernist poet in crisis, driven to employ language against himself, Silverstein's production showed a queer subject exploring outside the realm of language, using corporeality and direct engagement with objects to offer an exhausted subjectivity the hope of revival. At the end, Stone and Teirstein exited with the cabbage halves and the audience heard "On the Sunny Side of the Street," not in Foreman's loud and sarcastic rendition but in Billie Holiday's jaunty lyricism. De Garron, looking through a hand-held frame, listened transfixed, and then opened his mouth to the sound of fizzing first heard from the cabbages. In this production, the tension necessary to realize a Foreman text successfully was not achieved through abrupt breaks and temporal fragmentation, as in *Miss Universal Happiness*, but through De Garron's complex interaction with objects and the otherness of his own body. More than any other performer in these productions, De Garron embodied the radical strangeness of consciousness in Foreman's world.

Silverstein and De Garron reframed *Permanent Brain Damage*, taking it outside the male heterosexual framework that so often characterizes Foreman's explorations of consciousness. Cross-

dressed, solitary, and silent, De Garron's figure moved outside the ideologically privileged status of Eddie, Samuel, and American Tourist. By shifting the gendered subjectivity at the center of the play, the production disrupted the anxious male/female dichotomy so prevalent in Foreman's work, which led Richard Schechner to characterize him rightly as a latter-day Strindbergian. Here, the queer and feminine were opened up to freer explo-

ration than Foreman has permitted himself in his own productions. This revelatory restaging of *Permanent Brian Damage* showed some of the new riches to be discovered by occasionally liberating the intriguing and demanding plays of Richard Foreman from the control of Richard Foreman the director.

ROBERT F. GROSS

Hobart and William Smith Colleges