

BAD BOY NIETZSCHE. By Richard Foreman.
Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, St. Mark's
Church, New York, New York. 30 April
2000.

In the thirty-two years since he founded the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre, Richard Foreman has established himself as the preeminent playwright and director of the American theatrical avant-garde. This, his forty-seventh production, is his first to explore the life of a historical figure. The death centenary of the man who proclaimed God dead provides him with a timely excuse for such a departure in dramatic technique. This is not to suggest the production breaks from his trademark exploration of consciousness, but the mind explored is that of Foreman through the character of Nietzsche. With *Bad Boy Nietzsche*, Foreman depicts an ecstatic sacrificial Nietzsche, consumed with erotic guilt. This image of Nietzsche owes much to Foreman's *Georges Bataille's Bathrobe*, produced in 1983 at the Festival d'Automne in Paris, which avoided the title's historical figure altogether. While Foreman refrains from a presentation of Nietzsche's ideas or biography in any coherent sense, we are given a glimpse into the psyche of a writer in the midst of madness, without any discernable plot.

Played with a frenzied blend of delicacy and recklessness by Gary Wilmes, Nietzsche's every step reflects his refusal of ontological assurance; like walking on eggshells, he seems unsure the earth will remain for his foot's return. Dressed in a nightcap and the tattered remains of a professor's wardrobe, he maintains the far-away look of someone not entirely there, never making eye contact with the other characters, all of whom provoke and simulate his anguish. His is a lovably loopy Nietzsche, whose masochism is the source of his charm. Juliana Francis rejoins Wilmes from Foreman's last play, *Paradise Hotel*, solidifying their

reputations as two of the most promising and exciting young actors on the New York experimental scene. Her character, the Beautiful Woman, is a cross between Lou Andreas-Salome and Cosima Wagner; the two unconsummated loves of Nietzsche's life. Kevin Hurley plays the Cruel Man and Sarah Louise Lilley makes her New York debut as the Child. Claiming to have read fragments of his work, she questions his authenticity, for this frail creature hardly resembles the tragic hero Nietzsche's writing celebrates. She brings to the proceedings a naive delight in destruction and an innocent sense that reality is just a game, with madness a fun way of playing it. The Cruel Man scowls throughout the performance, his militant macho quips (delivered with deadpan disgust) contradict Nietzsche's every assertion. His sadism reaches its apex when he beats the backrest of the seated Nietzsche with a golf club.

The three characters not only challenge Nietzsche but also misinterpret his words. The most humorous yet most unnerving sequence reflects the Nazi misappropriation of Nietzsche: he claims to have baked jewels into holy bread, but they think he has baked Jews into the bread. This question of alleged anti-Semitism is further suggested by four silent disciples dressed like Hassidic scholars, who catch Nietzsche when he falls, snatch up his wrinkled pages, and watch over him like an imprisoned saint.

The sound and set design are representative of Foreman's distinctive style. Each of the speaking actors wears a microphone headset, and eerie loops reminiscent of low-budget horror films, pings, and Foreman's own recorded voice interrupt the live dialogue. The set is a cluttered landscape familiar from previous Foreman productions; letters and scribbling decorate the walls, the floor, and the Plexiglas that separates the audience from the stage. Much of the imagery is recognizable as part of his established vocabulary: lights brighten suddenly to blind performers and audience, string is stretched across the front of the stage, the silent disciples simulate masturbation with oversize phalli, the Child brings out a cake topped with an electric candle, and the Cruel Man emerges in one scene wearing a feathered headdress. Not all of the props are dusted off from former productions. Giant cutouts of a fish, feet, and a ship appear briefly, all serving to enhance the theme of shipwreck as metaphor for the slip into insanity. Two large poles extend from the ceiling above the audience down to the front of the stage, on which Nietzsche imagines himself impaled at the heart in a crucifixion pose (the other performers mimic this action, though never with his intensity). Stuffed horses are



The cast of *Bad Boy Nietzsche* by Richard Foreman. Photo: Paula Court.

whipped throughout the play, as a reminder of Nietzsche's breakdown in the market square of Turin as he attempted to shield a horse from being beaten.

However, Foreman does not succumb to the tragic, giving us the sad story of a great mind gone to waste. Eschewing historical accuracy, he does not set this piece in Turin or the Jena asylum in which Nietzsche was institutionalized following his collapse. Instead, we are told that this madman's paradise is China, though it bears no relation whatsoever to the Asian nation. Having turned the world upside down, we are free to laugh at that which would ordinarily be most disturbing. Like other Foreman plays, the effect on the audience is one of confusion that breaks into random ripples of laughter.

Doubtless, Nietzsche has long been an influence on Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theatre. Both thinkers dare to take language and thought to the very limits, with the audience along for the ride. It was fascinating after the performance to look in the program and realize that several lines heard as quintessential Foremanisms were identified there as taken from Nietzsche's writings, proving that his choice of character marks not as much of a

departure as one would imagine. To have presented a realistic biographical depiction in a coherent narrative would be a betrayal of both thinkers' style. Foreman's engagement with Nietzsche's character results in arguably his most important play.

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