

THE BIG ROUNDUP

Richard Foreman takes on the ghosts of imperialism.

BY HILTON ALS

Before the vital and brilliant American playwright and director Richard Foreman found a permanent home for his Ontological-Hysteric Theater, at St. Mark's Church, in 1992, you had to seek out his annual productions in small, experimental venues around town. I first went to one of Foreman's plays, "Eddie Goes to Poetry City: Part 2," at La Mama in 1991.

I had never seen anything like it before, and haven't seen anything comparable since. By then, I'd already heard about Foreman; I knew that he not only had been writing, directing, and designing his own plays since 1968 but also had directed works by Brecht and Molière, here and abroad, and staged a number of operas, ranging from Johann Strauss to Philip Glass. Still, nothing had prepared me for the darkness and the dazzle—the murky splendor—of "Eddie." A kind of Cabaret "Candide" that evoked the wretchedness of desire, the play infiltrated my thoughts until its actors and its dialogue began to feel like figments of my own imagination, suddenly made real in my poetry city, New York.

Eddie, a sweet, open-faced naïf, was a poet-Christ figure, wandering through a corrupt metropolis where a series of hard-boiled female characters tried to lure him down the slippery, sexy path to wisdom. And yet he remained largely incorruptible. The cynicism he encountered was as baffling to him as the lip-sticked sirens whose movements were

choreographed to entice him. At some point, his good-natured optimism began to feel almost as grotesque and willful as the temptations of the villains around him. To tell Eddie's story, Foreman eschewed the conventional dramatic devices of exposition, motivation, and resolution in linear time and space. Throwing Aristotle out, he ushered the



Power play: "King Cowboy Rufus" evokes the leadership of Bush and Blair.

subconscious in. His dialogue was full of the hilarious slips of the tongue and double entendres of daily life that allow our sentiments, as well as our nightmares, to seep to the surface. In an essay in his 1992 collection, "Unbalancing Acts: Foundations for a Theater," Foreman explained his artistic intent this way: "Society teaches us to represent our lives to ourselves within the framework of a current narrative, but beneath that conditioning we *feel* our lives as a

series of multidirectional impulses and collisions." He went on, "I like to think of my plays as an hour and a half in which you see the world through a special pair of eyeglasses. These glasses may not block out all narrative coherence, but they magnify so many other aspects of experience that you simply lose interest in trying to hold on to narrative coherence, and instead, allow yourself to become absorbed in the moment-by-moment representation of psychic freedom."

In short, Foreman is a poetic realist. The psychic freedom in his work grows, oddly, out of his fixed obsessions—namely, female sexuality (he generally views women as dangerous, conniving, alluring vamps) and his own

Jewishness. Foreman has described himself as a "closet religious writer," and many of the stage sets he designs contain symbols from Jewish mysticism, which serve as talismans of his faith and of what that faith has generated in him: a spirit of inquiry, skepticism, and hope. Foreman's casts always include at least one character—usually male—who appears as the Semitic model of disbelief.

In his latest work, "King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe," that character is given the rather stolid yet florid name of Baron Herman De Voto (played by the versatile T. Ryder Smith). At the beginning of the play, De Voto, dressed like an errant rabbi in a dark suit and a stiff black wig, renounces his ownership of a tobacco factory, which, it seems, is the source of all social evil. Sitting at a table, facing the audience, De Voto intones in the midst of voices, "Thank God I am closing down my dilapidated tobacco factory—stuffed full of coquettes and whores. I've had enough of this shit world in which I find myself." This is *Krazy Kat* by way of Spengler—a dis-

tinctly Yiddish locution with a nasty street snarl, which tips De Voto into a defensive kind of despair. De Voto serves as a sort of alter ego for Foreman—the critic in the playwright's mind, the character who doubts the artistic process even as he becomes an integral part of it. With his deadpan face and conservative gestures, De Voto is the heckler at the back of the class. In this case, the classroom is the world. And the world is an outgrowth of Foreman's distinctive visual imagination.

The stage at St. Mark's is relatively small—it measures twenty-eight feet across—but Foreman floods it with information. Stage left: oil paintings in fake-gilt frames show women in Renaissance dress, standing by canals. Stage right: a sign advertises the *Maison Rouge*, a cathouse. At the front of the stage, facing the audience, Foreman has placed four poles, each holding a cluster of light bulbs that give off a migraine-inducing glare. Above the center of the stage, a row of fluorescent lights flicker. As the director Peter Sellars points out in the foreword to "Unbalancing Acts," in a Richard Foreman production, "There are messages written all over the set. . . . The lights are flashing because, in our lives, the lights are flashing. Are we getting the signals . . . or are we going to shut our eyes until it's all over? Are we able to gaze steadily into the source of brightest light? At what point does it become too painful?"

Part of what makes Foreman's characters feel like apparitions—figures who, in the midst of a hideous, cluttered landscape, seem to take in nothing at all—is their lack of response to the glare. Light is as natural to them as darkness is to a bat. At least, Susie Sitwell (Juliana Francis), a former worker at De Voto's factory, seems to flower in it. Delivering her lines with the flat affect of a lobotomized but naughty ingénue, doused in *L'Air du Temps* and intelligence—her sharp, stilted movements recall those of Oliver Sacks's "sleeping" patients in the film *Awakenings*—Susie is looking for a new boss, a new man, a new hero, to take De Voto's place. (Without a man, she makes clear, her existence as a self-described "coquette" would be meaningless.) The man she needs appears almost at once: King Cowboy Rufus (the gifted Jay

Smith), who decides to buy the tobacco factory. Wearing a ten-gallon hat and an eighteenth-century frock coat, his lips and face rouged and powdered beyond anything Beau Brummell could have imagined, his belly jiggling over his sheepskin chaps, Rufus stalks the small stage with aplomb. This is *his* world, he seems to be saying; we're just living in it. "Are you really an American cowboy hero?" Susie asks him. "Or rather—an old-fashioned English fop harboring impossible dreams of glory?" Well, Rufus is a bit of both. And why not? Isn't this make-believe?

It is, and it isn't. Rufus's will to power—like that of the world leaders he evokes, George W. Bush and Tony Blair—is as real as he is invented. Rufus is a symbol of imperialism gone mad. "I'm no traitor. And I'll prove it easily with my subsequent violent behavior," he announces. He has "family values"—dolls descend from the ceiling whenever he needs to prove that he loves children—but what do those values mean when the very heart of his quest is to suppress and destroy anything that contradicts his own reality? "Recently I find myself performing random acts that just bounce back and forth inside my head like a ferocious game of Cowboy Ping-Pong," he says, after firing his gun at Susie and trying to strangle De Voto. In the unexplained mayhem that follows, the characters are blindfolded and left to stumble around the stage and slit their throats, in a kind of hell of their own making.

"King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe!" is, ultimately, about our inability to "wake up"—as an offstage voice (Foreman's own) repeatedly commands us to do. The play is one of the most overtly political of Foreman's recent works, but he balances its didacticism with a mordant wit. At the end of the show, the supporting cast carry globes onstage for Rufus's target practice, but he is stymied: he can't choose which world, which reality, to destroy first. "King Cowboy Rufus" echoes the past (from time to time we hear a voice counting in German, punctuating the dialogue). But history, Foreman implies, is what we're done with; now we must make our way, through the blinding lights of CNN and other forms of propaganda, into an unbrave new world. ♦