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Shanghaied Gestures

Two New Shows Explore the Fun of What's Been Seen Before

By Michael Feingold Tuesday, Jan 21 2003 Comments (0)

You could almost analyze it as a matter of contrasting cultural heritages. Charles Busch and Richard Foreman, more than a generation apart in age, grew up on, and work in counterpoint to, the same kinds of theater, though their approaches are vastly different. Both are almost equally fascinated by film, a realm in which their tastes are likewise disparate. Foreman's matrix is silent film, especially of the slapstick and French-surreal varieties; Busch inclines toward Hollywood weepers of the big-studio era. The now antique style of "well-made" Broadway play on which both were nurtured is to Foreman a site ripe for nightmarish philosophic infiltration: a spiritually empty, albeit lavishly furnished room in which mad chains of associated ideas can incarnate and burgeon to fill the available space. Busch's impulse is simpler: He just wants to move into the room, take over its luxurious appurtenances, and have fun.

Since the room in question belongs to the theatrical past, this makes Busch a madcap Goldilocks, slurping up the porridge of its history. To atone, while feeding on the past, he simultaneously makes a joke of it, asking, in effect, "Why shouldn't I steal this if it's such trash? Besides, I look fabulous filching it." Which he does. Since Foreman's guilts, worn more openly, virtually are his pleasures, he has no such problem. His even less likely tactic is to sneak into the abandoned past and pour his own freshly deranged porridge into its cracked old bowls. The resulting mix of flavors, delightful to me, is notoriously not for every taste. Busch's straightforward subversion has wider appeal.

Shanghai Moon, Busch's latest entry on the list of past genres to subvert, deals with that eternal collision, so dear to the hearts of Art Deco collectors, between the ancient, corrupting East



photo: Paula Court Panic! (How To Be Happy!): as the brain turns

Details Shanghai Moon By Charles Busch The Drama Dept. at Greenwich House 19 Barrow Street 212-633-9632 Panic! (How To Be Happy!) By Richard Foreman Ontological at St. Mark's Second Avenue and 10th Street 212-533-4650

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and the brash, all too willingly corrupted West. The matrix for this myth was formed in 1915, when [Sessue Hayakawa](#) lured [Fannie Ward](#) into his clutches in [Cecil B. DeMille's \*The Cheat\*](#). Among the myriad plays, movies, and drugstore novelettes it spawned were Maugham's *East of Suez* and *The Letter*, and [John Colton's \*The Shanghai Gesture\*](#). [Lilian Braithwaite](#) was pursued on the London stage by *Mr. Wu*, while on-screen [Barbara Stanwyck](#) drank *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*. As you see, it took a lot of artistic recycling to change [Marlene Dietrich's](#) name to Shanghai Lily. Even [Mae West](#), you may recall, is being kept by the wealthy Chinese owner of a San Francisco gambling den in the opening reel of *Klondike Annie*, and Busch could do worse than adopt her theme song from that sequence, "I'm an Occidental Woman in an Oriental Mood Called Love."

Busch is [Lady Sylvia Allington](#), who has come with her aging, ailment-ridden husband to visit the Shanghai home of the warlord General Gong Fei. Lord Allington has been sent by the Home Office to acquire for the [British Museum](#) an ancient Manchu sculpture from the General's fabled collection, and this contrivance, absurd in itself, is as close as the evening gets to dramatic logic. The logic of the genre's myths, however, the script follows immaculately, as Gong Fei's passion and Lady Sylvia's frustrations, or maybe vice versa, lead them inexorably into one another's arms and thence to an epic series of disasters, climaxing with the pistol shots that open [William Wyler's](#) superb film version of *The Letter* and coming to a full close with a revenge so thoroughly theatrical that—opera fans will know what I mean—it would scarcely be out of place in [Adrienne Lecouvreur's](#) dressing room. As the action wends its luridly spoofy way, Busch gets to pose as a grand lady, a Bright Young Thing, a hard-bitten slut from the wrong side of the tracks, a helpless victim of passion, the victor in a series of bitch-slaps, a temple dancer (think [Tilly Losch](#) in *The Good Earth*), and the badgered defendant in a courtroom drama. ("I'm not acting," Lady Sylvia declares of her elaborately posed sincerity in this last section.)

The paradoxes that Busch embodies so beautifully—the ladylike man, the utterly innocent poseur, the genteel person steeped in coarseness—are in their glory here, with the running joke on gender giving the jokes on genre and ethnic stereotype an extra-giddy spin. The hard part is that Busch has written himself such a festival of opportunities, and carries them off so appealingly, that his excellent supporting cast hardly gets a look in. [B.D. Wong](#), as the General, solves the problem by marching steadfastly through the role, as if declining to notice the explosions of laughter from the detonating jokes in all his speeches. [Daniel Gerroll](#), doubling as Lord Allington and the thuggish captain of a boatload of opium (you knew that a boatload of opium would be involved), tries gamely to match Busch's cartoon fervor, though given much weaker material. [Becky Ann Baker](#), as a local brothel madam, and [Marcy McGuigan](#), as an ancient Chinese doctor, get what fun they can (a lot in Baker's case) out of the character-actor turns prescribed for them. The whole thing, under [Carl Andress's](#) direction, is raffish, and good-natured, and just a bit stiffly one-dimensional—except for Busch, whose two-dimensional iconography is always only the top layer of a mile-high sandwich of attitudes and commentary. First comes the pose; next his pleasure in the pose and his hope that you share it; next his awareness that the pose itself is old and cheesy; below that his

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sense that it's a female pose of which he can only make a temporary construct; at the very bottom is that basic impulse, always found in a Busch performance, the child's pleasure at play and mimicry. If the atmosphere in the dramatic space surrounding Busch's performance, here as in previous outings, seems thin, it may be simply because he carries so much density on his own.

That may be the respect in which Busch has most in common with Richard Foreman, the difference being that Foreman, who virtually never appears onstage in his own pieces, projects his inner emotional density onto the whole scene. In a Foreman piece, the whole physical event is layered rather than any individual performance. Foreman actors, in fact, tend generally to be more effective when maintaining a certain degree of impassivity. The four main performers in *Panic! (How to Be Happy!)*, the latest whirl through Foreman's brain circuitry, all have this noncommittal quality to some degree, replacing the hint of masked emotional depths that a [David Patrick Kelly](#) or a [Juliana Francis](#) might bring with a bounce-back eagerness for experience.

And in Foreman's world you had better be willing to bounce back; the dangers are everywhere, visited on you by your colleagues, the set, the soundtrack, and what seems to be an entirely irresistible willful cosmos. One of the new visual attractions of *Panic!* is a cutout bull's-eye target, suspended downstage right, in front of which the characters, one by one and over and over, can't resist posing, only to get whonked by some tiny sound effect that appears to cause unutterable facial pain. One can't predict the sound, though. This is the most richly varied score Foreman's come up with in some time: The music, largely classical, is constant and always changing, varied by a wide range of pitched sounds, including a madly ringing phone and enough shakes of the crash box to score a year's worth of [Chuck Jones](#) cartoons.

The visual chaos that counterpoints this sonic frenzy is, as usual, laden with sex and violence, including on the one hand some fairly outré pubic-hair sight gags, and on the other much play with short swords, a lot of it centered around the knife-routine cabinet from a magic act (recalling the vanishing cabinet that never vanished anybody in some earlier Foreman pieces). The characters have distinct names and personalities, which is unusual for Foreman, but are largely relieved of the burden of dialogue by a prevailing (though not smothering) voice-over, which utters pithy assertions like "I shall not enter this tomb" and "Here's tomorrow's baked goods, stale already." Like the imagery that washes over them, the characters are Foreman's familiar prototypes, but far from staleness, done up in costumes that suggest 19th-century theatrical prints: a gruff Highland chieftain ([D.J. Mendel](#)), a Renaissance fop in a pink doublet ([Robert Cucuzza](#)), a virgin bride on the verge of Lammermoor madness (Tea Alagic), and a kohl-eyed seductress in black ([Elina Löwensohn](#)). Of the four, it's Cucuzza whose personality most makes an impression: mincing, lilting his lines in falsetto, a look of moonstruck delight in his eyes and a cynical, self-satisfied smirk on his lips, he forges a link between the here and now of Foreman's tormenting awareness and the memory of theaters past, proving again that, the more we live in the present, the more likely we are to be drawing on the past. In art there is, actually, nothing newer than the very oldest things we can snag, and the best way to make fun of the classics is to be one.

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