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Foreman's Wake-Up Call

Imagery is everything, so shouldn't Richard Foreman really be running the country?

By Michael Feingold Tuesday, Jan 13 2004

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No U.S. president, I expect, will ever appoint a Secretary of the Imagination. But if such a cabinet post ever were created, and Richard Foreman weren't immediately appointed to it, you'd know that the Republicans were in power. Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't. Which is why I personally think they should be exterminated before they cause any more harm.

This opinion is presumably not shared by Foreman; you can gauge the breadth of his imaginative compassion from his willingness to extend it even toward George W. Bush, idiot scion of a genetically criminal family that should have been sterilized three generations ago. The hero of Foreman's new play, who is and is not the president of the United States, is a cowboy who dreams of being king of the universe. Only, in the first instance, he isn't really a cowboy—he's "a foppish English gentleman" named Rufus who dreams of being a "real American cowboy"; his dreams of being King Cowboy of the Universe are always being brought up short, during the work's giddy 80 minutes, by his awareness of this inherent falsity in his role. Waving and wildly discharging his giant six-shooter, Rufus invades the audience, drives his supporting cast off the stage, and revels in absolute power. But, as is customary in Foreman's deceitful universe, something always arrives to trip him up; often enough, it's his own self-doubt. Jay Smith, a



photo: Paula Court

Tarnation, indivisible

Details

King Cowboy Rufus Rules the Universe

By Richard Foreman Ontological Theatre at St. Mark's 131 East 10th Street 212.533.4650

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strapping actor, plays these moments, when Rufus is suddenly overtaken by his flop actuality, with a hilarious dainty fastidiousness; it's like watching *Tom Mix* suddenly acquire a consciousness of Proust.

Clearly, Foreman loves and pities Rufus as much as he despises and fears him; Rufus is a part of him as Bush is a part of us. The whole thing is a nightmare, much of which Foreman stages—between bursts of frenzied violence and slapstick—with a slow, dreamlike melancholy. "Wake up," Foreman's standard vox ex machina keeps urging his characters. The call's reinforced by [Susie Sitwell \(Juliana Francis\)](#), Rufus's female opponent, goad, and temptation. Invited to sing something "uplifting," she responds with a few bars of "When the Red Red Robin Comes Bob Bob Bobbin' Along," but gets stuck on the phrase "wake up" in the lyric, repeating it with the pallid helplessness of the Little Match Girl hawking her wares on the snowy streets. Francis, whose angular beauty and lively presence usually bring her more acute-minded roles, has never seemed so wistfully vulnerable; unnerving in itself, her transformation enhances the show's overall scariness. Full of character interactions and budding twigs of plot, the work feels more like a conventional play—probably something post-Chekhovian—than anything Foreman's done in years.

It isn't one, of course. The air of surrender may be everywhere, even on the aesthetic front, but Foreman's no defeatist. In addition to Susie, Rufus has a male rival, alternately accomplice and opponent, [The Baron Herman De Voto](#), embodied by [T. Ryder Smith](#) with a slouching, rat-like charm, Pacino-ite diction, and a gift for deadpan comic timing that makes his the capstone of these three winning comic performances. (I've been going about the house for days now, trying to duplicate the way he says "Crete"—just the one word—without cracking up; I can't.) The Baron owns a cigarette factory, shuttered by the economic downturn, where Susie works as a "coquette." (Shades of *Carmen*.) Rufus contemplates buying the factory, thinking ownership would entitle him to "dalliance" with Susie and her fellow "strangely attractive female employees, whom, I believe, are never disinclined to such adventurism." (The line perfectly conveys the Edwardian tea-party language into which Rufus is constantly lapsing.)

Like most of Rufus's attempts at adventure, this one either goes haywire or gets deflected; Rufus's attention span is no more reliable than his diction. Not for him the tragedy of *Don José*. Girls, antagonists, business, the astonishments of the universe—nothing can get in the way of this fake cowboy's dreams of glory. Even the end of the play is so contaminated by Rufus's ego that Foreman has to go to extraordinary lengths, in the show's last outrageous laugh, to keep it from infecting the curtain call. In a remarkably explicit program note, Foreman explains, for the first time in my experience, his authorial intentions. "I hope," he says, that the play's fictional devices "allow many levels of theatrical irony and comic energy to coexist with my anguished point of view concerning the direction in which current American policy is leading us." Rest assured, Richard, your hope is fulfilled. The wonder is that a work so filled with hilarity should leave, as its last impression, such an overarching sense of anguish.

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