

Poor Murderer - Pavel Kohout - translated from Czech by

Herbert Berhof and Laurence Luckinbill  
New York, 1977

I am making this brief note of my recollections of Poor Murderer two or three years after the fact - the exact date escapes me - because, quite simply, it is the best play I ever saw. It was the best because it grabbed me, as they say, and broke me up. The dilemma of the central character was so perfectly me I cried. This is admittedly a very subjective criterion. I think even by other standards it is a stunningly good play dealing with the central, and now common, theme of mid-century man - lost of identity by role playing.

The play takes place in the St. Elizabeth Institute for Nervous Disorders, in St. Petersburg, Russia, in 1900. The subject-matter is the treatment by dramatic therapy of anfamous actor who has been incarcerated as insane for killing one of his compatriots during a production of Hamlet. His compatriot was his mentor, director and rival for the affections of the actress playing, naturally enough, Ophelia. The victim was playing Polonius and was actually murdered on stage as he hid behind the pillar. The doctor has encouraged the mad man to present a dramatization of his life up to and including the final deed. The actor does so on a small stage constructed on stage for this purpose. So we have a play - Hamlet - within a play - the actors life - within a play - Poor Murderer. And the writer moves from one to the other with consummate skill conveying in the end an unparalleled depth of character

and situation.

The immediate plot is the love affair. Our hero failed to win his love because he was such a good actor she was unable to recognize his affection. It was indistinguishable from thesbian flourish. Indeed for the first half of the play the hero suffered the same confusion. When he realized his mistake it was too late. Jealousy that could find no relief overcame him and killed his best friend. Then tortured by remorse and loneliness he lapses into a comma. Ophelia, or whoever, deeply moved by the agony she has observed vows to stay by his side until he finds his soul again. The doctor says it is futile. And the curtain falls.

I made a list of some of the remarks that seemed to fit me, or I imagined fit me:

- no appreciates my rapier-like mind as much as I do
- the perfect liar; no-one knows when he speaks the the truth; even when speaking the truth someone finds lies in his eyes;
- life is "interesting" - not passionate, sad or vicious or happy - "interesting"
- recreates in the theatre the elements of his madness
- attempt to pass off insane actions as calculating
- actor = lawyer
- enjoy being alone in my apartment with my thoughts
- father doesn't function from the tonsils down

This play was without doubt an inspired piece of work. It borders madness; the boundary is blurred but it has not disappeared.

Sunday, October 22, Spiderwoman Theatre Group,  
Friday Night, written and performed by Najamah Beye, Pam  
Verge, and Lois Weaver;  
Jealousy, by Gloria Mojica  
And My Sister Ate Dirt, written and performed by Lisa Mayo,  
composed by Annie Flood.

Wednesday, October 25, I'm Getting My Act To-gether And Taking It  
On The Road, book and lyrics by, and starring  
Gretchen Cryer, music by Nancy Ford.

Let me leave aside Friday Night and Jealousy for the time  
being. My Sister and Getting My Act To-gether demand comparison.

And My Sister Ate Dirt is a deeply moving one-woman song  
series performed by the writer. It is a this-is-my-life self-  
portrait of a fat middle-aged housefrau from Brooklyn, one quarter  
real Indian, who can sing. She comes on joyous - "I'm on, Annie,  
I'm on". She sings of goodtimes and bad as a personal statemnt  
with no shame and great pride in the sisterhood she has discovered.  
Her style is Ethel Merman. Her dress is forties matron, brown  
velour sewn with with sequins, white gloves and hat. Mercifully  
she takes off only the later two. Her political and personal  
conclusions are evidently lesbian, although this point is more  
implied than made. There is a profoundly liberating feel to the  
performance. One leaves the theatre happy for, and proud of this  
person.

Getting My Act To-gether is a deeply moving show, a star  
vehicle for Gretchen Cryer. She plays a lady rock singer trying  
on a new feminist show for her manager. He doesn't dig it. Their

personal and professional cat fight is the thin plot and verbal interlude for the feminist songs performed by Cryer and fine troop of singers and musicians. Cryers conclusion is not lesbian, though she doesn't shy any from the subject of gayness as a backlash to the difficulties of liberation. Her conclusion is that I have to stand on my feet and learn to be alone. She does not shy away from the sexual polemics either. On this score she is altogether brilliant, putting across some pretty heavy-duty analysis in an eloquent and simultaneously entertaining way. I was particularly impressed with her understanding of the dependent female syndrome as a manipulation by women and a chauvinist ensnarement by men. She described it as a portrait of a woman in transition. There is no redeeming love at the end of the show. Indeed you are left wondering whether it is possible. Her songs are great, some splashy up-tempo, and some ballads intensely personal. The entire production despite its immense polish comes across as a statemnet of openness and vulnerability and hope.

I cried a little in both.

Why is the vehicle of liberation for each woman performance? Cryer lead song is, "Music is my one salvation...singing in a rock'n roll band is a natural high". The central dilemma of each show is the difficulty or impossibility of intimacy with men after liberation. Why take to the stage? The idea that there is great honnesty in the anonymity of the footlights is not new. And maybe these two plays should seen only as personal statements, not general prescriptions. Maybe the stage is the vehicle because I am in the theatre. Maybe because I am in New York where confessional cabaret is all the rage. Two other Papp hits come to mind, Runaways and ~~Cryers~~

and Chorus Line. And, of course, Coloured Girls.

But consider the differences between the two shows. My Sister Ate Dirt was performed in the basement space of Medusa's Revenge, a lesbian theatre and rock'n roll club, to an audience of about one hundred. Getting My Act To-gether was done in the Public Theatre for several hundred, a very professional well equipped but intimate theatre. One audience was bohemian, punk, gay and artsy. The other was well-dressed, coupled and hair-tinted. My Sister is about a lady who still lives in Brooklyn with no apparent aspirations to stardom. My Act is about a retired TV soap star turned rock singer turned feminist for whom public self-exposure is the ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ rule not the exception.

Perhaps I am simply unaware but one can't help wondering where is the men's half of all this, both the basement and the cabaret versins.

It is "big mistake" to find social health or sickness in the theatre of the day. But it ideed makes you feel good.

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The other two Spiderwoman plays were problematic. Jealousy would be excellent for a church basement audience of unliberated women unuse to theatre and its capacity for personalized drama. This is not to put it down. Such an audience is surely more desized than the Bleeker Street bohos. Who wants to preach to the converted?

Friday Night was a somewhat uneasy compromise of this same problem. Parts were wickedly funny and totally accessible as statement of the "friday night syndrome" from the woman's point of view. It's good to laugh at identity crisis. And probably great theatre for

groups of young women in the throws of liberation and self-exploration. Even some of the abstract poetry and imagry would be suitable, courage of self-expression etc. But some of the staging, the long silent ~~inx~~ lead-in for example seemed out-of-place, something atrsie for the bohos, that derogated from the central and necessary priciple as I understand it, of such theatre, and that is accessibility.

The performers in Friday Night were class. If the lighting was bargain basement, and who cared, it flattered their very polished presentation.

Oct 25/78

Passion of Dracula, Cherry Lane, November 1, 1978.

This is one two Dracula shows currently running, the other which I haven't seen yet is a much bigger Broadway number famous for its sets. This is intimate Dracula, off-Broadway Dracula. There is no reason there shouldn't be another, and another. We know the story, the characters are always the same, ~~the~~ and there are only two endings - Dracula dies, or Dracula dies but lives on. We ever tires of the titanic struggle of good against evil?

In this particular round of that eternal battle the author and the director are the winners. The playwrite gets off more corny one-liners than I care to remember, most very funny as a spoof on Victorian drawing room drama, which, come to think of it, I have only ever seen satirized. When Lord Stuart, last of the rough-and-tumble really noble and patriotic country lords, offs his erstwhile lover, now vampire, the lady shrink now ghoul, his German paramour and-I-don't-care-what-they-say-even-if-there-is-a-war, he ~~said~~ solemnly takes stage centre. He announces he will join his love in eternity - after driving a

stake through her heart (to really kill her and prevent her from further ravishing the beloved countryside and terrorizing his peasants). "She can take me," he proclaims, "but she ~~sak~~ shall not take England."

The staging was a delight. Thunder, lightening, burning crosses, creeping fog, Dracula appearing and disappearing in a flash, blood, blood, blood, bats swooping through the audience. They loved it, screams and shreaks. Saturday afternoon at the movies.

The acting was barely possible, often inaudible.

I liked the script better than the Dracula show at the Free Theatre last year. A little more naked philosophy about good and evil than the other venture. But to normal people it probably seemed out of place in such a hopped-up melodrama. However it seemed to give otherwise utterly commercial fare just a touch ~~af~~ of class.

While waiting for ~~the~~ curtain I read in Variety that a new movie in the works discovers an aging Dracula ~~hunking~~ haunting the punk clubs of 2nd Ave. Why not?

Oscar, Rock Opera, Hot Peaches and others,

This restaging of an earlier "hit" (which I find hard to believe) is a gay message of some kind. Oscar is the modern namesake of the Victorian faggot who is true to his patron in thought word and deed. Right down to the grim trip to prison. Our Oscar ends his life in apparent madness, being wheeled up and down Christopher St. in a shopping cart. One good number in the punk style, although it could just as well be Stones, was the only part of the production worth staging. The rest was rubbish - in conception, definition and performance. Too bad. In theory there ought to be classy gay theatre.

Clara Bow Loves Gary Cooper, by Robert Dahdah & Mary Boylan

This is next thing to a great play. The only thing missing is an ending with a bit more punch. Clara Bow tries to learn a ~~little~~ little culture, and how to talk proper, so she'll be worthy of Gary Cooper, her one true love. Like Liza Dolittle she gets tested at a high society party. Unlike Liza she flunks the test. And loses Gary to the high society lady who hosted the party. The upper crust will have its way! I don't know

~~what end~~

what ending would please me. I wanted something more than a closing monologue by Clara, "Oh, yea, it was tough, but I found other men, ~~xxxx~~ but my career was never quite ~~the~~ same". Did I want Clara and Gary to get to-gether for a finale? Did I want "love" among the "stars" to triumph after all? Normally I would want all the stars casts into hell. But here there were other enemies, so the stars could be human. Gary Cooper came on like such true cowboy, real folk, one is hardpressed to understand why he would sell out to the uppercrust. May-be if the parts of his snobby mother, and the Countess, had been stronger the sense would have been of inevitable doom for Gary. In any event a plot with bitter class content in a format for the commercial theatre.

However this production was rank amateur. The musical and dance number were painful. The staging was awkward. The acting, except for the two stars, was East Village amateur. A very stylish jazz age production is there for the taking for somebody who'll put up a few bucks.

December 9, 1978

The Penny Arcade Peep Show, based on the novels of William  
Borroughs

Le Plan K, Belgian Avante Garde, part of the Nova Convention.

Unforgettable. Totally bizzare. May-be the wierdest thing I ever paid to see in the dark. But I liked it. It mattered little that it was utterly incomprehensible. It had energy like I've never seen.

Borrough's novels feature the mind police of a future time and their efforts to stamp out all forms of sensuaousness. His heroes are the wild boys, outlaws, and other degenerates beyond the control of these bad guys. The closest I came to meaning was that these were the wild boys at play in an auto-wreckers backyard.

The Nova Convention was the basement event of the season, a celebration of Borrough's life-long attack on modern man's over-indulgence in literal intelligence. Mostly ressurected beatniks, Timmy Leary, anti-shrinks, artie-punks, reformed freaks, and in a different auditorium across town, open to the venturesome masses Le Plan K doing their thing in an enormous theatre space at triple time with no intermission.

No discription of what happened could do justice. Imagine a Bump-bump car ride on the midway in the dark with giant shiny metal abstract scultures instead of cars. Without motors. Wheeled around by modestly naked men. With thunder crashes when they smashed together. Neon sword fights. A ton of metal confetti. A dissembled and brightly painted VW modeled as a wardrobe. Tea served to all from a silver service while one plays

one plays dirges on the exhaust system (of the car). A lot of shouting in French and English. Meaning lost. The proverbial garden hose filling one of the sculptures with water.

Whatever they were doing it was energizing. Perhaps that was the point. But I never felt like joining in. If that was the point. And never worried that I didn't get the point. If that was the point. If it was pointless I got it.

But Borrough's is still a nut for portraying degeneracy as any kind of freedom. That is for sure to guarantee people will miss the point.

Le Plan K has Borrough's endorement of thier exercise posted in the foyer. I couldn't understand it either. A cursed prisoner of literalism.

December 10, 1978.

Albert and Loose Ends, by James Pashakides

The reason New York is fun is something to do with Albert and Loose Ends. Look at the listings, not the reviews, pick one that sounds interesting, and go. At \$3 you never lose. And sometimes you win big.

So in this tiny but well equipped uptown theatre we saw two one act plays selected for their one line tags. Albert, a mouse that eats cloths. Loose Ends, James Dean meets Marilyn Munroe. It has to be good.

Albert is a parable of madness. Bookstore clerk of decidedly moussy disposition acquires a fear that a mouse in his closet is growing into a monster, eating his new wardrobe (it was clearly the attempted change of image that triggered the descent into darkness.) and demanding more and more food from the reluctant proprietor. Who then comes to love his obsession ~~to~~ so much he breaks off his engagement, and quits his job. Friends from the audience try to help out. Come on stage and try to talk him out of this madness. To no avail. End of play. Albert tires of his new love, and she tells him to get lost anyhow, which he does.

James and Marilyn do just what you'd expect them to do with an added dash of gratuitous psychoanalysis. Interesting mostly because mousley Albert and his obsessive girlfriend from the first play become hunking Jimmy and slithering Marilyn in the second. A mostly satisfying transformation.

December 8, 1978

Approaching Zero, George Kaiser,  
Direct Theatre Co., at La Mama

This is German Expressionist play of the 20's of astonishing contemporary relevance. It is story in three parts of the rise and fall of a billion-dollar energy conglomerate and the family that ~~xxxxxx~~ owns and runs it. The family tortured by wealth, spinning off hippy-type rebels and third-generation environmentalists out of the womb and seed of ruthless power. And an industrial empire producing some amazing power source, called gas, that eventually destroys all in an industrial accident that had the Seabrooke dissidents jumping in their seats projecting "I told you so, I told you so" so viscerally you could see it on stage.

The plot was interesting only in its inevitability. The production was brilliantly crisp, smooth, stylish and articulate. Which is not to forget mechanistic in a fashion appropriate to the gendre and the subject matter.

One of my companions observed that ~~xx~~ the staging was largely borrowed from Fritz Lang Metropolis. If so I liked it. Clever use of shadows, and minimal props.

Talking Band, Worksong,  
December 3, 1978

In prose, poem, chant and song the Talking Band do their version of what it's like to work, a favorite theme of arty village leftists. They garner praise from the cognisenti of garage theatre and critics of the obscur. They fill a subsidized theatre space with upper-East Side bohemians and would-be actors who murmur approval.

They are technically good at what they do. Voice and chorus sound theatre with little motion or commotion. But many acting companies are as good.

Their material is disappointing. The Rockefeller family gets a once over, moderately lightly. Some scenes from a fish-gutting factory. It looks like the left-overs from a better show. And indeed it is. Studs Terkel took away some, (most?) of their sketches when the show Working, based on his book of the same name, was done up for the bright lights of Broadway. Where it flopped. Too bad. For sure this group could do a fine job with that ~~kick~~ text.

But compare it to Ten Lost Years, Barry Broadfoot's book and play staged by George Luscombe. George is out front by a country mile on all counts, emotive content, visual style, music, and beautiful sound.

Talking Band is promoted by Artservice Inc., the kiss is life for art-the-obscure that would make a living. ~~Even~~ Even in the depths of Soho the hustle is only dance they know.

The Gingham Dog, Lanford Wilson,  
City Gates Rep. Nov. 18, 1978.

This is an excellent first act, entirely domestic quarrel between the remains of a liberal white architect and his black social workers wife, also in ruins. It degenerates from political catcalling to racial bigotry and personal despair in the most logical fashion. Interventions by your-friendly-neighbour-and-hippy-humourist and by I-tried-to-be-liberal-but-now-I'm-a-stewardess-and-always-your-sister add great depths to the despair. The dialogue is eloquent. If the message is disappointing, that the races won't mix in present circumstances, the portrait is honest. There is fine sense of the happier days gone by conveyed by reminiscenses which highlight the current hatred. The quarrel is not particularly ideological, and any political conclusions are left entirely to the audience, or appear to be. A playwrite must never preach.

The second act is daring. It is short, extremely quiet, depressed, muted, forelore good-bye, never-to-meet-again.

There is no flash at all. Nothing you would dare laugh out loud at. No hope of redemption. He moves to the Y. She picks up Spanish tricks. Neither has family to consol them. This is a down.

Unfortunately a buzzing overhead light obliterated the better part of this intense and intimate dialogue. So I can only imagine its power had circumstances been right.

The production was a cheapie. With no adverse effect. The actors were terrific. The diector kept the characters moving around teh stage in the first act at a frantic pace, packing and unpacking, slamming doors. It added greatly to the dynamic.

The Other Leading Brand, Club 57

A definitely amateur cabaret comedy group with quite decent material. The production might ~~haxxxw~~ as well have been in somebody's basement. No costumes, no set. But it was cheap.

The routines were T.V.-oriented, a sick Firesign Theatre including a racist anti-Paki skit. Baseball sportscaster interviewing Mike Jaggar was good. Baby photo of test tube baby also rich. Violence and depravity were very close to the surface all the time.

False Promises - San Fransisco Mime

November 24, 1978.

It is stunning how similar in form and content to Cultural-Revolution-style Chinese opera is the San Fransisco Mime Troupe. How ironic it is that they would be so easily understood in China, while the White-Haired Girl would be incomprehensible in America, even to the majority of the left. Perhaps not incomprehensible, but it seem like too-thick propaganda. I suspect the reason for this is that American audiences would miss the subtle elements of the highly stylized struggle that are obvious to someone familiar with the contemporary nuances of the historical picture on stage.

This point is brought home watching *False Promises*. Ostensively about a miners' strike in the western U.S. in 1899, sell-out union leaders, imperialist wars directed by J.P. Morgan, and above all racism, the play <sup>is</sup> pregnant with contemporary messages. Some are so evident they are skillfully satirized by the company, the U.S. war to "liberate" Cuba, for example, is not strictly a nineteenth century folly. "I'm tonkin about the sinkin' of the Maine," says one of the sceptical characters.

Like the Chinese political theatre *False Promises* has a representative of each position on the political spectrum, and while the character is presented in a highly stylized fashion befitting a pageant, the position represented is invariably subtle reflecting the delicate compromise of pre-judice, principle and pressure that shapes reality. The White Miner and Mexican Miner revel in their mutual racism, but fight

to-gether, after a fashion, in their alliance forged more of necessity than desire. Each gives clear, and subjectively at least, good reasons for hating the other. And after portraying the issues in this fashion the play concludes the White Miner is a double-crossing snake-in-the-grass. You may disagree with the point of view, but you won't resent the virulence of the conclusion.

But more impressive still is the subtlety displayed in the understanding of the position of the Wobbie agitator, and the negro madam-and-bar-owner who ally with the strikers for their own particular reasons. The former blows his position with the miners who are about to elect him president of the union when it slips out that he'd like to carry on the strike until all the capitalists are tossed out, in just the immediate enemy, the evil copper trust run by J.P. Morgan. The workers, of course, reject the task of taking on the world, and he curses himself in a solo on the sloppy way he backed into the issue of international solidarity. This has to be the only time revolutionary tactics are mooted to music on the popular stage. It comes off beautifully, albeit to an knowing audience. The role of the sell-out union leader in provoking the revolutionary outburst is deliberately played up. The apparently irresolvable conflicts within the strike force of how to continue the strike, if at all, against apparently impossible odds are sympathetically shown.

And the conclusion, like the Chinese counterparts, is upbeat. We lost this round, we may have problems, but we will fight on.

Clive Barnes liked the show. This is a dangerous sign. He said it was a charming blend of amateurism, professional theatre and (naive) deeply felt political hope. I felt somewhat uncomfortable with how professional indeed the production presented itself. If you were out to buy Broadway slickness and polish \$7 for the San Fransisco Mime is no doubt the best bargain in town, though few in that market could grasp subtltly of message as opposed to subtltly ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ in affairs of the heart as the guts of a stage work. The audience, at \$7 a seat were evidently sympathetic, but polite and restrianed. Perhaps for good reason, the staging was so careful and planned we didn't want to miss anything. This is certainly different than I remembør the troupe years ago as street theatre group were spontaneity on stage and the audience was the rule. Is this a sign of the perfection of our theatre or the degeneration of our politics?

Double Dreamburger, November 25, 1978

Alan Rossett

This is called a farce revolving around the foibles of a middle class family in the 50's and 60's. But it's much more than that. There is certainly enough psychiatric insight into the roots of gayness to keep one in serious contemplation of wildly funny characterizations on the stage. The kind of play that makes you gasp as you laugh, or visa versa.

The story is simple and familiar. Father is an absentee jerk, grumpy, reactionary, inhibited, a money machine of mother an unrelenting nerd, possessive and dictatorial of her children, Melinda and Rodney. Melinda becomes pregnant by, let's call him Edgar because I don't remember. Rodney falls in love with Edgar. As a matter of fact so does mother. Mother makes Melinda marry Ward Gunderson, a boy next door who everyone would hate, but God knows he's available. Edgar does a number on all of them, talking like a comic book, a spaceman, a cosmic crazy, who they all believe is on the verge of something. Rodney escapes, not without a little violence, and runs off to Paris to join Edgar. Rodney's romantic aspirations are clear, though I must say, not Rodney's.

Act Two is an unhappy reunion twenty years later. Rodney and Edgar come back. Mother is still overbearing, now a hippy. Melinda is an alcoholic with a sex crazed dope-made daughter. Ward is father from Act one, reincarnated. The conclusion

is not so penetrating as the opening. Everybody smokes dope. Rodney under compulsion! And their real(?) natures come out. Mother mellows with her children and talks dirty. Edgar admits he's a failure and a fraud and mouch and a bum. Rodney flips out. Rodney is put away for shock treatment. Rodney can't even be revived by the good news mother has died.

How would you present this Freudian horror show? With whimsical piano accompaniment, strobe-light dream sequences and dim-light sililoquies, of course. It works too. Whimsy because the circumstances are so grotesques all you can do is laugh, and thank good for the music to easy the pain. The dreams and sililoquies are necessary to carry the interior dialogue which is the essense of the play. Indeed the characters visibly turn the imaginary lightswitch when they want to tune down the lights and tune out the rest of the characters.

The plot doesn't sound funny, but until the end it is a fine vehicle for characterization, even ridicule, of some stock persona. Mothers may not be able to laugh at this play as this one says for the fifth time, tying her daughter to the bed and going out for bridge, "Sometimes a mother is your worse enemy."

The last ten minutes are not comprehensible. Too many twists. Why does mother force Rodney to smoke dope at gunpoint? Why doesn't he bounce back when she dies? Did he really believe Edgar was somebody special? Nor are the last ten minutes funny. Got to stop these playwriters from getting serious.

This was an almost brilliant introspective play with profound insight into contemporary generational conflict. It stumbled badly at the end and the meaning was lost when it should have been loud and sharp, even if two-sided. The staging was a brilliant format for this sort of subject matter. And so was the mixture of whimsy, absurdity and humour, as the grease allowing us to enter this precarious predicament and still enjoy it.

Sam Shepard

Mad Dog Blues, Academy Arts Theatre Co., October 28, 1978,  
Cowboy Mouth, written with Patti Smith, Club 57, October 20, 1978,  
Burried Child, Theatre for the New City, Oct. 29, 1978,  
Angel City, Urizen Books  
The curse of the Starving Class, Angel City & Other Plays, Urizen Books.

I have been on a Shepard binge. To get the feel of what so many call the best.

Mad Dog Blues is a collage of stock characters hunting for gold in the Mexican jungle. Captain Kidd, Mae West, Marlene Dietrich, Paul Bunyan, Jesse James, creatures in the fantacy lives of the lead hands Yahoodi and Kosmo, junkie-beat-macho and rock-star super-cock. There are a few songs written into the show and music right along with the mime and costume party. It's a game of ~~posturing~~ posturing, a circus of stereotypes. This particular production was extremely unpolished, although the acting wasn't that bad. The play is fun, and while this production dragged in places I'm sure something more professional, perhaps just more rehersed and expensive, would be just fine. We follow our lead characters as they follow their visions. The ending loses shape in this sloppy production. The treasure turns out to be fools gold. Our friends have destroyed their friendship in the process, indeed everybody's ability to play to-gether. Then the cast reconciles for what appears to be happy final chorus - but the words are forlorn - we ain't got no home. Some very grand speeches, sharp dialogue, terrific stacato musical script.

Cowboy Mouth is an orge of despair by a failed rock/country singer and his ambitious groupie who would make him Christ. It is eventually exploded by appearance of a clattering seven-foot orange dancing lobster, a deliveryman from Mr. you-know-who. Who unmasks and turns out to be somebody's former lover. The script puts down Mic Jagger. The production was at Club 57, an East Village punk club of considerable charm, reminiscent of I imagine to be the scene of Berlin cabaret mud-wrestling. The production was punk. Utterly junk acting. If one believes in the priciples of punk this will not offend. However...

Burried Child, Shepard's latest, has a most professional and stylized production at the New City. An Edward Hooper set, 50's mellow mood music and meticulous staging. The play is good enough, but this kind of classy production will carry any three acts a long way.

The play is supposedly a re-write of The Curse of the Starving Class. If not a re-write, then son-of-the-curse. Both these plays are different in substance from the others which deal directly with stardom, rock'n roll and fantasy. These two are about the American family. The family in the Curse is ugly and bizarre. The same characters in Burried Child are ugly and surreal. Dad is a vicious old cripple, Mom is wining shrew, and the boys are either dead, one-legged or demonstrably ppsychotic. After Act I I thought it was a domestic pot-boiler with a few, some inappropriate, surreal jokes. After Act II I thought it was I vicious surreal attack. After Act III I couldn't characterize what seemed an immensely powerful ending to the pot-boiler and surreal zoo I had just witnessed.

Vince returns to what he believes is home, your Norman Rokwell Iowa farm, but nobody recognized him. He finds his dad there with gramma and granpa. But who is the real dad, and the real mom, for Vince? The family secret we have been told is that granpa killed gramma last-born, illigitimate child and burried it in the back garden. One suspects that is a false confession, an attempt to erase Vince from the family memory. Until the lights go done on Act III and we see dad carrying in a freshly exhumed carcass. Anyhow Vince, after a terrible temper tantrum achieves recognition, inherits the farm, and settles down as the new old man to recreate the same ugliness all over again.

This is the same resolution of The Curse. Who says you can't go home again?

The dialogue is beatiful. Much is Pinteresque, quite appropriate to vacuous non-communication being portrayed. With a few eloquent speeches that just take off in the midst of the clutter. Logic tells you they shouldn't be there, but the surrealism of the production releaves you of any obligations to logic.

Surreal sight gags abound. Dad comes in with an armful of corn one act, carrots the next. He burries sleeping Granpa in the husks, And puncuates the dialogue of the second act dropping cut carrots into a tinny bucket. The baby the last act, all presumably dug from the same garden.

In the last analysis I think the surrealism adds to the grimness of it all. Nothing redemes. Everything is hopeless sick. It is not inappropriate for this play. But is the play appropriate for America?

Ridiculous Theatre Co.  
Utopia Inc. - Preview - November 19, 1978.

Can you write a play composed entirely of bad one line vaudeville jokes? Strung together on a corny plot about falling into, and then escaping from, utopia? And wear silly costumes? And feature a fat actress doing Mae West imitations?

The answer would appear to be yes, but Ludlam didn't do it this time. One half the play was good bad jokes. The other half fell terribly flat, left one looking for some, even symbolic, meaning in the plot, an utterly futile waste of time. I was completely derailed wondering why utopia was divided into apparently warring factions - the drag native girls with green and orange hair vs the mummy in the wheel chair. Fortunately a tight string of bad jokes absolved me. Perhaps my legal mind has poisoned me for free-form thinking.

The vaudeville idea seemed fresh, and could be perfected in a torrent of pun - ishing showmanship to leave an audience gasping. But in the context of a post-hippy, campy, halloween party? Keep the corny plot, improved somewhat, and the stock characters, but can the costumes.

Seduced -Sam Shepard - Feb. 14, 1979.

Sam Shepard again. This times he rings hollow in a very cool and elegant visually elegant reading of what should be a desparate and tormented portait.

Shepards character is Howard Hughes dying in his anticeptic Caribbean hotel suite, paranoid he is losing control, dreaming of a return to Vegas, conscious he is losing touch with reality, but determined until just before the end never to let the sun's rays fall on him, and above all trying to recreate a macho self. It is the spiritual death of the aging cowboy, Shepard's favorite figure. Hughes takes the form Henry Hackamore withering before our eyes on his couch tended by his man servant in his ever whim. He never touches the floor - fear of germs - and walks on wads of kleenex. Most pathetic, but with no failing of ironic oral faculties. Two of his favorite ladies visit him in this bizzare seclusion. His servant indulges his fantasy to fly again bringing him his old flying helmet and jacket. The same servant makes him sign a will leaving it all to him. And dies in a visually splendid scene standing in his pajamas goggles and flight jacket, framed against the starry night, standing on his bed in winged fantasy saying, singing, I've been to the world but I've never been born.

That's what the play is about - non-existance. Hughes is taken as a paradigm because he so successfully hidden himself that he no longer exists. The privacy he created for himself

has consumed him and he is worried. He ~~wax~~ worries, "they're evacuting the country without me." The existential D.T.'s at deaths dark door. Hackamore the macho man, the boss, the tyrant, the lover, ~~experienc~~<sup>fights</sup> the loss of power with all his remaining strength, but appears only as pathetic. His servant starts ordering him around and he yields. This half of the character is ugly.

Shepard's dialogue is very direct in its approach to these issues. Not much absurdist comedy here. The speeches are long, not elegant, but solid. But the play meanders badly in the second act. Hughes wants the women to tell him stories, personal ~~stor~~ies, to renew his touch with reality, human emotion. The stories stop in fairly short order because he isn't satisfied with their factual veracity. The sequence goes no where. Surely he could have been dissatisfied with something more profound than that.

The theme is not really well handled. The cowboy's loss of a sense of reality is nothing new. Hughes doesn't help us understand it. He puts an ugly face on it. Indeed he partially denies the urgency of the problem so doing. The icy cool production distances ~~us~~ us from the dilemma. There is no anguish, just a ~~dis~~illusion projected into death. Perhaps that is the message, not the fault of the production, rather a reflection of the fact I don't like the playwright's vision. Perhaps some people are stirred by the immortality fantasies of a vicious, sexist, arrogant shark.<sup>on</sup> If they see his just reward in all this I would like to know what it is. He is not just a harmless old man. As he says - "Nothing is harmless until it's crushed."

On the Twentieth Century

What do you get for \$22.50? Not bad balcony seats.

Great looking trendy art deco train sets. (The twentieth Century

was the fast train from Chicago to New York in the 30's.)

Imagine Coca, old as she is, still trying. A few flashes

of class staging. Borrowed and butchered music that has

little apparent relation to the 30's, sounding desparately

like a 1955 Broadway reject. A cute little Ben Hecht play

blown to smithereens by this pretentious production. A scene

stealing athletic imitation of a vain glorious would-be

stud star a la 1932 - the only character on stage who evoked

the spirit of the age if such ephemeral category exists. And

dozens of missed opportunities for better dancing, better

lyrics, more jokes, better staging.

Why do people pay \$22.50? Obviously because the critics

tell them to. Why do the critics do this? One answer is that

they like the shiny big sets that move around the stage. I

have seen several shows in the bowels of the Village that

have as much to say - which isn't much - and are equally

~~entertaining.~~

entertaining. They would be just as good if we spent \$200,000 on them. Better with classier cast. This is the meaning of the word "show".

A second suspected reason is that the plot, not to sneered at simply because it's fun, embodies the theatre metaphor of life, projects emotions and animation up onto the stage, onto actors portraiting stars-as-they-really-are-off-stage. Nothing to worry about there. This isn't your fantacy life up there that the director might screw up. It's another world of gods and godesses.

Watching the show aroused my instincts as director-cum-circus-potentate. If this is what the people want I can do it flashier than that. It is a sense you don't get when the modesty of a downtown production overwhelms you, albeit, ~~mainly~~ for strictly financial reasons.

Jan 6/79

Going to Djibouti, Red Mole Enterprises, Westbeth Theatre,  
New Zealand Touring Troup

This is a strange mixture of heavy politics, madcap theatre, and costume pagentry, with music. The politics are ambiguous. The madcapery is less than polished. The costume pagentry is often pointless. The music is undistinguished. Still I didn't feel I wasted four dollars, only an evening.

If it were not for an out-of-place narrator I would know nothing about the plot. Cuban revolutionary heroine fights for the Eritrean rebels and establishes an Eritrean lover. Years later she returns from other African wars to fight for the new allies, the Ethiopians, against her former friends, meets up once again with her lover and kills him. If the scenes telling this story were not pointed out by the narrator you would miss them in the non-stop costume party transpiring on stage. And if he didn't explain in the most painful detail the mechanics of left politics in the Horn of Africa - including reading from the newspaper - it would be incomprehensible. And the narrator admits in the course of his monologue that the company had given up the plot long ago - "Be careful, you'll miss it." "Remember this takes place in Angola, if you can believe that."

But worse than burying the plot the company gives off bad vibes about their heroine and her politics - a cynical tone without clear meaning. There are scenes of flag waving - three actresses literally stand on stage and wave red flags - which can hardly be expected to stir the passions

even of a left American audience, and thus ~~xxxxxxxxxx~~ sow the seeds that this is dumb politics. Again some of the skits of the war theatre in Africa convey the sense of mindless militarism on the part of the Eritrean rebels. There is no feeling of tragedy when politics and love at last confront one another in fatal conflict - no feeling at all. It would be all right to attack Cuban imperialism in Africa, or the mindlessness of left politics, or all politics, but I frankly don't know where Red Mole is at.

The majority of stage time is witness to endless series of unconnected skits, often funny, but not very. Tarzan in the jungle, Alice in Wonderland, Punk Rock, silhouette shows, crazy costumes. Much too often these seemed to be filling time. But colourful it was.

The company seemed talanted, singing, acting, climbing ropes, playing with fire. Too bad they forgot to tell a story.

Are they the wave of the future as they claim. Clowns and mime are the the rage in New York. S.F. Mime and Bread and Puppet Theatres are the grand daddies of a theatre movement. These guys are good disciples.

The Runner Stumbles - Milan Stit - Circle Rep - Feb 9 /79

The Runner Stumbles might have been a profound play in 1962. It would have been great play in 1952. It would certainly have a daring play in 1942. And shocking in 1932. But in 1979 who cares about ~~the~~ the torment of a priest and nun in love except as an allegory of cruel duty stifling boundless love. The theme is profound, and extremely well handled. If nun's and priests still move you may-be the play is still great. The country folk suspect far worse than actually transpires behind those rectory curtains. I have always suspected you what I saw. A priest, not at all a bad man, devoted to the church and its most perfect authority as the manifestation of goodness in the world. A priest who speaks of nothing but discipline, strength and punishment. A priest ~~is~~ who is being punished by that same church for his indiscrete compassion to the ~~dying~~ dying. Who denies love when he finds it, and compassion when it is wanted. A nun trapped in a habit much too tight for her warmth and humanity, whose gaiety, ~~and~~ spontaneity, forgiveness, directness, hope and love wrecks the fortress of the tortured priest. When at last the priest discovers the source of his torment - his love of this woman - he finally speaks those fatal words - I love you. But now he hates God. And alas feels compelled to continue in form of service to the church though no longer the spirit for the sake of the people. A I think the nun going mad and being buried alive by the shocked and pious housekeeper of the rectory is a bit much. But plays have to end.

If such a powerful play could be written about contemporary characters it would to-day be a great play.

If I think about as something first done thirty years ago it is a marvel. The plot on which all this is hung, a murder trial, is well crafted. The dynamic between the three leading characters was superb.

The play is tragic. The priest who didn't murder the nun, although he tried, is acquitted in the murder trial. He leaves town a broken man, no faith, no church, no love. He leaves the stage sobbing. It's good to see a baldly tragic ~~performance~~ and profound performance.

Feb 179

Da -- Hugh Armstrong

A very slick sentimental play about Dad, this time the ignorant Irish variant, Da is a prize-winning commercial success. This Dad is an obsequious, taken-advantage-of gardener married to tea-drinking tyrantess. He is oblivious to his class oppression and copes with his wife by evasion, submission, sly naughtiness and irrasible good humour. He is portrayed as stupid, but good-hearted. Explicitly stupid. One of the characters repeatedly calls him so. By objective standards he is not appealing.

But the production is. The structure of the play is skillful, perhaps brilliant. Charlie, the son, returns to bury the old man. He is now a successful playwrite living in England. As he cleaning up the old home Da comes to him as a ghost but large-as-life. Then Mom. Then teenage Charlie, and teenage Charlie's erudite, prim, schoolmaster-employer, Mr. Drum. Charlie reminisces with them all, a forty-year old conversing with his memories.

Unfortunately this clever form has little content. The pain and suffering of childhood, the good times, the warmth, are nothing more than that. Charlie hates the ghosts, wants them to get out of his head. This is one of the central themes of the play. But there is no hint as to what these ghosts now represent in Charlie's character. This is not a plea for deep and extensive psychoanalysis. That would ruin the play. But surely Da has evolved into something more than a memory of the person.

The play

The play ends with Charlie fleeing from the hold home shouting at Da, "You're dead. You're dead. Leave me alone. You can't come." And Da follows like a little puppy dog out for a walk. A maudlin ode to the only ~~real~~ <sup>i</sup>reality ~~of~~ <sup>to</sup> eternal life.

The play is funny in all the right places with easily accessible broad jokes. The humour is not barbed, ironic or witty.

A suspect half the matinee audience were over sixty. They laughed a lot. Cried a little. Applauded with arthritic passion. So this is commercial success.

Feb. 10, 1979.

Telacast

My strategy failed me. An unheard of show in a church basement can't be expensive, might be good, and, if nothing else, will point in new directions. Well this one was expensive, bad and, if I can invest the expression with snotty contempt, out-of-date. It was some fool's Broadway tryout, but I don't think Broadway is fool enough. The play was stupid - the son of old and great T.V. vaudevillian tries to make it wearing dad's shoes, but falls flat on his face singing "I'm really very ordinary." The music was boring. The lyrics were appauling - "I watched dad shaving, Watched his whiskers go down the drain..." It's painful to think about it. Nothing can save it. An extroordinarily talented cast are the stuffing ~~is~~ for a most expensive turkey. What a waste.

The Nature and Purpose of the Universe      Christopher Durang

Feb., 18, 1979.

I was lured to The Nature and Purpose by exotic ads of what I thought was a, or the, wicked witch holding a submachine gun on Snow White. I expected great things from Durang whose play the History of the American Movie was a tour-de-force of culture kitch marinated in existential absurdities. It turned out not to be the wicked witch, perhaps a wicked witch, being the a mad nun bent on staging a coup against the Pope. Still a theme with profound potential. And it wasn't Snow White; it was your average American Mom in the final stages of torment. Still promising. ~~The~~

The best thing you can say about the play is that the idea was good - Job is a woman, Mom to be precise, tormented by fate and God who quite deliberately inflicts misery to test her faith. One son is gay, the the next a pusher and the third has lost his penis in a reaper accident. And her husband is Catholic. Her inflictions are funny. In theory. Unfortunately her physical inflictions are graphic. She is beaten repeatedly, kicked, raped and molested. The violence on stage is so endless that it overwhelms any comedy.

In the end God saves her - saves her live - on the sacrificial alter - but only after she has been so savaged that life is not worth living. As the angle chorus sings hosannas to God's mercy she cries out I want to die. I want to die. It is a neat, but dated attack on God. But all to vicious an attack on women.

Starluster - John Wellman - American Place Theatre  
- Feb. 16, 1979

This play was basement production by the American Place Theatre, one of the establishment showcases for new American plays. It was in the basement because it is an obscur play and they are normally produced, if at all, in basements and garages. But instead of the usual hack actors usually found in basement productions we were treated to fine readings by a very fine group of actors. Who almost made something out of an obscur play.

The setting is a cafe-hotel in Libson inhabited by expatriate Americans, writers, spies, sabateurs and the like. Who speak in riddles. And never tell one another what is their secret even though never asked. And discover each other's cover but don't tell, or do tell they have discovered the cover but never disclose what it is. They play tricks on one another, but never inform the victim or the audience what it means. They mope about the death of the sixties and the lack of meaning in the seventies and their lost station in life. They do have personal relations, based on fears without origin, jealousy without cause and rivalry without relief. In the end something happens in the U.S.A. and everybody leaves. There is an attractive good guy, but he is empty of love, and without purpose. Except in the finale we learn he did have meaning something to do with whatever happened back in the States for which he leaves in a hurry. There is unattractive bad guy, a neurotic, not at all cool like the good

one, who broadcasts messages to Starluster on his portable wireless, messages profoundly inscrutable. Each has a girlfriend of sorts, one hates, the other is rejected.

And every now and then a bizarre-looking guitar player in dark glasses appears from behind a screen on stage to accompany a singer in the chorus of a surreal love song about the black sun and death.

What does 1920's anarchistic surrealism have to offer a view of the lost generation of the sixties. I think nothing. That generation prefers the hysteria and self-indulgence of exhibitionism to the catatonic zen of the burnt-out victims of existential absurdity. The play was not well conceived.

But it was certainly well presented - to ourselves and to a large group of the author's friends.

Feb. 17, 1979.

The Coach With Six Inside - Jean Erdman -inspired by  
Finnegan's Wake

This is upper East Side existential musical comedy. A mixture of ~~music~~ music and dance, text largely in Gaelic, with puns in English, visually splendid, as they say, ~~with~~ with unintelligible stage metaphors - like the chicken, what did the chicken stand for. Why did I stand for it? But it's all the dramaticization of Finnegan's dream so who would expect to understand. The perfect existential event. No meaning and no expectation of meaning. Many people left. Beth liked it. The music was nice.

League of Youth - Ibsen

A very modest production by the unsubsidized Drama Committee Repertory Theatre. Excellent fast-paced staging for a large cast. Several very good actors. Making the most of limited resources.

But the play is no longer funny. It is suppose to be a satire on two-faced politicians. However it comes across as a satire on drawing-room drama.

Rats Nest - Neil and Joel Cohen

Great American plays all(?) all take place in a bar, just as English plays take place in the drawing room, French in the bedroom and Canadian in the kitchen. So Rats Nest is off to a good start. Three of its four low life creatures are persuasively bizzare. The other I suspect was only badly acted. Jerry the bar owner is funny, ruthless, exploitive, ~~ungrammatical~~ ungrammatical, vain. Dennis the hard-hat vet, repair-man, ~~weight~~ weight-lifter, Ming-vase collecting bartender is sensitive and offended by the corruption around him yearning to escape. Larry the rich liquor salesman is superbly ingratiating and ugly. Jeanette the declassé slut is sexually grotesque and sharp. But Michael the drugged-up voyageuristic hippy is not persuasive.

But alas the plot is maudline. Dennis wants to go, but he doesn't really want to leave his friends. Will he become a mercenary? Will he have the courage to close the door? Who knows or cares.

The Marquis of Keith - Frank Wedekind

I went to this production to see Wedekind, the famous German radical writer and producer, and contemporary of Brecht. I had read that the production was bad. I ignored this, as the carping of bourgeois critics who wouldn't understand. They were ~~w~~ right. But, alas, so was the play.

The company is Shakespearean. What does an expressionist satire look like when performed with Shakespearean passion. Grandly tragic and totally hollow. Very bad business.

Taken in Marriage Thomas Babe

Babe is one of Joesph Papp's coralled playrights. And this was a stylish production sponsored by the master. And a stylish audience. And a stylish cast including Meryl Streep. About stylish rich New Yorkers. All women. Bitching at one another at a wedding rehearsal. At which the men do not show. The first act was sharp. The second act bogged down badly, especially when the women started dancing. For the most part nothing happened, who knows, may-be that's what their life is like. The talk was possibly interesting in the first half, and close to boring in the second. But it is a no win proposition - I hate them when they are bitchy, and they are boring when they're not.

Re-Arrangements - directed by Joesph Chaikin

at LaMama ETC

Chaikin is a faded guru of the 60's and this is first theatrical production in several years. It is suppose to point the way to the future. To me it indicated only that the favorite New York theme of meaninglessness has found a ~~symbolic~~ meaningless set of cool images and dry jokes. Visually the production was very fine, in the minimal tradition. The actors were also extraordinarily well controlled and paced, right down to co-ordinated breathing. And the musical accompaniment - of the mellow precussion variety (without drums or cymbals) was most fitting, beautidul and perfectly co-ordinated with the production. But alas the script such as it was left almost the entire meaning of the play up the specualtion of the viewer. It was really nothing more than a series of mostly visual skits about human relations. Man and woman dine to-gether staring ~~longly~~ longingly. Man and woman fumble to-gether in bed. two bag men fight. Perhaps toom perfect a picture of empty relations.

Dark Twist - Jeff Weiss

This was an unforgettable scene - probably a bad play, and definitely an indulgence to its writer, director, star, Mr. Weiss. It was a five-and-a-half shaggy dog story about the perils of gay fantasy. The plot, very roughly, concerns the abduction of an ordinary, offensive, American daddy and schmuck by the trendy pop psychologists who with the connivance of his family attempt to make him free - that is gay, emotionless, an actor, a unique person, lustfull et al. They play mind tricks on him to cultivate his fantasy life, all of which takes the form of dumping him on a movie set in which he stars as a macho detective. The struggle for his mind takes the form of fight between the bad psychologist and the good angle (with black wings - which I never figured out).

Anyhow most of the show is gay skits, about dyke mothers, the baths, musclemen, Bette Midler, and a lot of other numbers I didn't understand. Most of it is extremely funny. Considering the length it must be reckoned that there was an amazing amount of funny material consumed. It wasn't hard to enjoy because quite obviously the plot was not very important.

But the message of the play was grotesque for a gay production. The redeeming angle of goodness is sexless. The baths are suicide and death. The bodybuilders/wrestlers are murders. The gay god is an exhibitionist incapable of private feelings. Our hero/victim is eventually saved by the angle but only after his family is destroyed. The spirit of true friendship is rescued but there are no friends.

The wife said it all <sup>her</sup> ~~akk~~ as <sup>her</sup> throat was slashed

and her body added to the pile for the grand finale - "This ending sucks".

Doc 5

for Doc

Library