

# EMERGENCY

#26

## Requiem for a Scene

A New York autumn is always the washed-out color of 70's movies: TAXI DRIVER, DOG DAY AFTERNOON...

People with big jackets, hands thrust in pockets and shoulders raised against the wind, walking quickly along bone-white sidewalks. A human being among skeleton apartment windows, urban concrete honeycomb.

The PINK PONY CAFÉ is closing. It's the same story all over the Lower East Side: the landlord raises the rent or sells the building, and out they go. On Ludlow Street, where the PONY lived, both NADA THEATER and the PIANO STORE (also a theater space) have been similarly shut down in the past months. Today, on the front wall of NADA, a white sign with block letters: STORE FOR RENT.

NADA was many things to many people, but it was never a STORE. The PINK PONY, too, was not a STORE, a café where sitting at a table is a commodity. The PONY is a warm room, the best jukebox in the city, a smoker's haven, a tranquil place to read and write on a Tuesday afternoon, a meeting place on Friday night, a back room where musicians, poets and artists have been quietly performing for years.

But this is exactly the situation in today's New York: every place is a store, and every person a buyer or seller. If you don't fit this paradigm, out you go.

Many months ago, I wrote in these pages: "Something is happening." I still believe this to be true, and certainly for every door closed another opens. Case in point is CHASHAMA, a series of theater spaces in Times Square where an attempt is being made to produce exciting new theater (like Jay Scheib's current production of HERAKLES). Still, New York is

changing, and we are holding on to an idea of this city that comes from movies and songs and legends. We are being forced into a despicable adulthood, complete with boutiques and lunch meetings. Our collective threshold of practicality is being upped and upped to the point that we talk about punk rock but spend much of our time researching grant opportunities, where we talk about subversion but do endless web design gigs for corporate clients.

My friend proposed that all of us just boycott New York. "Let's go somewhere else, some shantytown in the middle of nowhere and build all the things we like: quiet cafés, bookshops, sticky alleyways..." Yes, why not? But we won't go, will we? There is the New York of our fantasies, where people walk down cold streets together, talking animatedly, hands in pockets. The fantasy of what is around a corner, of chance encounters, and the strange inspiration that comes from hundreds of dark high-rise windows, airshafts and traffic lights.

Luna Zeygman

## "Crime is easy; Shakespeare IS hard."

That's according to Danny, inmate #172336 at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center at Pacific, Missouri. He says criminals do what's easy. It's easy to steal from somebody; it's easy to sell drugs.



But seventeen men, Danny among them, spent every Monday night from January to June 2000 working on the first act of Shakespeare's HAMLET. They participated in seminars with local university teachers; they looked up words in dictionaries; they memorized Shakespeare's lines; they learned how to bring the literature to life. Danny says he knows no other time when seventeen inmates have chosen to do something hard.

Danny and his fellow actors are involved in THE HAMLET PROJECT, part of THE PRISON ARTS PROGRAM. THE HAMLET PROJECT is a three-year series of seminars, workshops, rehearsals, live performances and video-tapings of HAMLET with inmates at Missouri Eastern Correctional Center, a high-medium security state prison. Each act takes one semester. I'm casting Act II now and have to laugh at the actors who are worried that they don't have enough lines; a year ago, they didn't know if they could do it. Now they all want big roles.

Why HAMLET? The population of Missouri Eastern Correctional Center is typical of correctional institutions across the country. Many of the men have not finished high school, but they have heard of Shakespeare. They may never have read any of his plays, but they've heard of HAMLET. The invitation to work on HAMLET went to men who do not usually set very high goals for themselves. I asked them to climb the Mount Everest of dramatic literature and many rose to the challenge.

One of the Prison Arts Program's board members was deeply opposed to doing HAMLET. He accused me of forcing my will on the group. (The small group of guys who originally conned me into directing them had initially said they didn't care what we did, they just wanted to do a play. When I proposed HAMLET, they raised their eyebrows, but said OK.)

After seeing one of the performances, the board member and I drove back to St. Louis together. He said, "You were right. They're like us. This isn't beyond them any more than it's beyond us. They ARE us." And he wrote the program a large check.

The best audience comment came from the inmate who said, "I think it took real courage for you guys to dress up in sissy clothes and speak a foreign language."

Agnes Wilcox

## Dear Mister Brothers:

I am so glad you asked us why you are making this gazette. Here, I will provide you with the answer:



You are making this gazette because reading about theater is frequently more interesting than going to theater.

Now before anyone gets too upset, let me add that of course, there are exceptions to this. Is reading a 500-word theater review in a weekly magazine devoted to things-to-do (as if, in this insanely beautiful metropolis, it weren't a daily struggle just to pry oneself away from the opera that is, for example, a 50-year-old Hispanic man in a Mankind T-shirt hurling a rack of plastic-coated, red-satin prom gowns down West 36th Street as if they were going to explode) more interesting than going to see "Chicago?" No, reading the brief review is not more interesting than going to "Chicago." And it's not meant to be.

In fact, I would wager that no one who writes well about theater wants his or her writing to be more interesting than going to the theater. And the reason for this is that the best theater-writers are writing because, no matter what they may be bitching about on the surface, they love theater.

And this, I would say, is why theater writing, and not writing-writing (i.e. the narrative-driven Classic Novel I studied so hard to get my crappy college degree), is not only my favorite writing to read, but is frequently more exciting than, as stated previously, going and sitting in the actual theater.

Now, rather than scream about what a horrible state of affairs this is, let us use this point to instruct ourselves. Why is reading an interview with Charles Mee (Emergency #24) more fun than seeing a great deal of theater that is listed in the weekly magazine of things-to-do? Why, when all Charles Mee is doing is sitting on his ass, talking about his favorite subject? Why, when one realizes that the theaters in this town are nothing if not rife with exactly this scenario, with the one-man-show here, and the one man show there, E-I-E-I-O?

And I would say that it is because the actor/writer/director of the one-man-show frequently does not do the thing that Charles-Mee-on-his-ass does, which is the thing that any good storyteller does, which is the thing that the best actors do, which is this: lose themselves. And this, I think, is the thing Emergency Gazette is striving to give us, and the thing that many theater companies are also trying to give us, which is so valuable, which is a place where we, the doing things-to-do public, can have the life-altering experience of witnessing someone opening up so far that anything might come out, and by anything I don't mean the merely embarrassing and stupid of which all of us, including me writing this preening letter right now, are so fucking afraid. I mean anything. Anything like something that will make you dissolve. Anything like you are not here anymore. Anything like you have no name.

And this is a very worthwhile thing to be pursuing. So thank you for doing it, and please try not to get too tired and discouraged. And if you must, start charging money for this thing, for god's sake. People will pay.

Love,  
Mister Anonymous

## Dear Readers,

Yes, there have been lapses between issues, vast empty weeks when you craved a small gazette to peruse and found none. For this, gentle ones, forgive us. We are still striving to bring you immediate response, to create a gazette of theater that you can call your own.

So, fear not! Take to the streets! Bring your notebook and send us your communiqués, your reports from stages and auditoriums, your performative proposals and ecstatic analyses. You can email text to [emergency@notnow.com](mailto:emergency@notnow.com)

or post it to:

EMERGENCY  
733 Amsterdam Ave.  
Suite 21H  
NYC 10025

Look for archives at [www.emergencymagazine.com](http://www.emergencymagazine.com), and hold your breath for our next issue, #27, dedicated to the dramatic work of Daniil Kharks.

Meanwhile, we continue intimately,

The Brothers Lumiere,  
your neighborhood editors

## PICK UP THE gazette!

Labyrinth Bookshop, HERE,  
La Mama, Kraine/KGB, Chashama,  
Collective Unconscious, Tonic/Soft Skull, El Cafe  
Ontological Theater, St. Marks Books ALSO AVAILABLE

OUTSIDE OF NYC... see

[www.emergencymagazine.com](http://www.emergencymagazine.com) for where



**BAAL**  
Bat Theater (212) 226-2407, \$25  
Extended through December 16

Despite the shower of accolades it has received in the press, the Bat's held-over be-bop production of **BAAL** at the Flea isn't perfect. It's good solid work but it's not perfect.

At first blush, the production's central conceit seems ingenious: marry the 20th century's most decadent play to America's first bona-fide decadent movement, the Beat culture of Greenwich Village in the late 1940s.

Brecht wrote **BAAL** in 1919, the height (or the depths) of the moral and political swamp that was Weimar Germany. It tells the story of a poet who is the living embodiment of every evil in the world, who corrupts and ruins everything he touches, until he himself lies dying on the ground, consumptive, spit on, and alone. "Life's a toilet on which we shit," is his philosophy, and creation is "God's excrement."

Despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that everyone knows this is how **BAAL** views the world, they are attracted to him - and their own destruction - like moths to a candle. The degree to which the play prefigures Hitler's charismatic destruction of Europe is chilling.

Peter Mellencamp's rhythmic and colloquial "American" translation surely was the inspiration for the bebop trope. While there is a contemporary flavor to the language, one suspects that it is truer to the original than previous translations. "Fuck this shit" is "fuck this shit." No doubt this is what Brecht wrote and you're not liable to find anything like it in Eric Bentley.

You will find it in the writings of the Beats, however. There is some neat linguistic serendipity in the production probably owing more to the influence of Brecht on the Beats than to the Beats' influence on Mellencamp. The word "naked" pops up a dozen times, reminding one of Ginsburg ("...starved, hysterical, naked..."). Jesus imagery abounds, and in this low-life, criminal context, one thinks of the heroin-fueled visions of Burroughs, Selby and the Velvet Underground. Baal's drunken misogynist tom-cattling calls to mind Kerouac, Bukowski and Mailer (a Beat admirer); his pansexual hijinx evokes Ginsberg, Corso, and Burroughs. The dialogue interweaves nicely with the constantly wailing jazz trio in the corner, one of the most appealing elements of the production.

Most of the young cast turns in credible work. Unfortunately the weak link in the daisy chain is Michael J. X. Gladdis who just isn't up to the task of playing Baal. One of the great roles of modern dramatic literature, Baal calls upon the actor to literally perform the supernatural. A good, even a great performance is not good enough. The actor must seduce, annihilate, reduce the audience to ashes. He must be possessed of an antic spirit. We must not only believe that Baal wants to fuck everybody and that everybody wants to fuck him, WE must want to fuck—and be fucked by—Baal. There must be murder in his eyes. The actor should expend so much energy during a performance that he needs to be carried home on a gurney. He should be afraid every night of what he will do to himself and to the audience. Mr. Gladdis, while not disgracing himself, achieves none of this, and so fails to adequately convey Baal. Perhaps acting of that sort is a thing of the past.

Much better was Andrew Ledyard who played Eckart. A cool, seemingly unperturbable hep-cat at the outset, he makes the mistake of daring to play footsy with Baal. The arc of his performance from ice man to pleading, distraught lover is something to watch. Also very good is the versatile

character actress Joanie Ellen, who, among other parts, portrays an Eartha Kitt-like announcer and a Brooklyn landlady out of central casting.

Mr. Simpson's direction is fluid and fast-paced and to his credit he mined the play for maximum drama. But ultimately, the Beat conceit is—as is the way with so many Big Directorial Ideas—a superficial imposition that doesn't serve the best interests of the text. Having the cast snap their fingers while Baal recites his poetry is the sort of obvious cliché one would expect to find in a Walt Disney production of **BAAL**. Such nonsense has nothing to do with the play, only its arbitrary re-setting.

Worst sin of all: apart from the stylistic affinity, Simpson never does convey what possessed him to make the intellectual choice of setting this play in Post War Greenwich Village. It is not the perfect fit it seems to be. After all, Weimar Germany was a time of universal political breakdown, spiritual impoverishment and moral decadence. This could not be said of America in the 1940s, despite the underground presence of a few hundred long-haired discontents. It could, however, be said of America today.

There was a connection to be made between **BAAL** and the play's audience, and Mr. Simpson didn't make it. Consider this: a drunken young man deflowers a teenage virgin. When she—scared and whimpering—wakes and says, "Do you love me?" the man yells "Fuck this shit!" and kicks her out of his apartment. Such a scene would have horrified audiences of 30 years ago. Today, it gets bellylaughs. I think of such developments and the ongoing election fiasco and I think, "What new Weimar are we tumbling toward?" Clearly in our real life, **BAAL** is a thing of the future.

Trav S.D.

**LISTINGS**

**HERAKLES**

Jay Scheib, the Dr. Frankenstein of New York theater, assembles a Herakles monstrous enough for our age. Nov 30, Dec 1-2, 7-9, 14-16 (Thurs-Sat) at 10PM. Chashama, 111 W.42 St., 561-0632. \$15/\$10 students.

**ANOTHER TELEPATHIC THING**

Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar direct. An angel named Satan appears in a Hollywood casting studio and relates Mark Twain's tale of "The Mysterious Stranger" Nov 15 - Dec 9 (Wed-Sat) at 8PM. Performing Garage, 66 Wooster St., 529-1557 x 208 212-966-3651, \$20

**FOR 2D THEATRE**

Written and directed by David Chikhladze. With Matvei Yankelevich, Filip Marinovic, Amy Fusselman, Maya Jowler, and Yelena Gluzman. Silly theatrical games for sorcerers, typists, businessmen, ballerinas and madmen, joyfully discovering the conspiracy of everyday absurdity and logic. One night only! Dec 9 at 10PM. Collective Unconscious, 145 Ludlow, 254-5277. \$5

**COCK HEALER**

The life of stripper, masseuse and healer Rebecca Torosian. Through Dec 16, Fri & Sat at 10:30. 78th Street Theater Lab, 236 West 78th Street, 873-9050. \$15

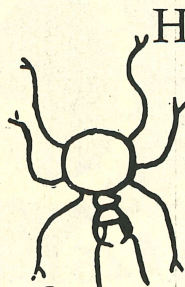
**A DREAM PLAY**

There is some strange duplicity between Strindberg and director Robert Wilson. Wilson's best since **THE BLACK RIDER**. Ends Dec 3, Thu-Sat at 7:30, Sun at 3PM. Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM), (718)636-4100. Prices vary; \$7.50 student rush tickets 2 hours before each show.

**THE BITTER TEARS OF PETRA VON KANT**

Fassbinder's famous film was first a play-script. Directed by Ian Belton. Previews begin Nov 30, Tue-Fri at 8PM, Sat at 2 & 8, Sun at 3 & 7PM. Henry Miller Theater, 124 W.43 Street, 279-4200. \$42/for \$25 tix during previews, call Ticket Central and give code word: "Petrified"

**MÁQUINA HAMLET**  
Periférico de Objetos (Argentina)  
18-21 October 2000. Closed



**Hamlet** is a dummy manipulated by one of five or six actors/puppet manipulators who move on the stage with the efficacy of waiters. They are sinister "waiters" serving us a meal of violent theater.

One of the most disturbing effects of **MÁQUINA HAMLET** is that the actors move the theatrical machinery yet they are not given a role to play. These "actors" are like us, the spectators, anonymous and at the same time complicit in the violent spectacle that they show to us.

The text is heard in the author's voice, so to speak, in a monotone coming from speakers. The text is the real mover of the stage vision even before we have heard the first words. The text and the dummy are one and the same, like thoughts coming out of a soul that wants to stop having a soul. Hamlet's soul is useless, and haunted by a mental theater that cries out for revenge, hate and more violence. It is served to him, first on a banquet table where the "waiters" manipulate some dolls which are made to play the roles of Horatio/Claudius/Polonius and Ophelia/Gertrude, all targets of Hamlet's discontent.

Theatre is violence that reveals itself as a narrative, a story that demands to be staged again and again in the minds of a character, an audience, of citizens, soldiers, heads of state and in the histories of nations. Violence and terror seem to have no agent, always happening a bit ahead of us and spinning mildly out of our control; violence and terror comes to the stage as we become spectators. A theatre is a theatre is a theatre and so is the **Máquina Hamlet** where Hamlet, the dummy, has to play Hamlet again and again until....

"Ah the whole globe for a real sorrow!" cries Heiner Muller's Hamlet, "something is rotten in this age of hope." Hope, that disease of a soul that is always forcing itself to find its place beyond violence, is also the disease where our theatre cancels itself out, giving room to a real world where violence has inexplicably disappeared. In the work of **PERIFÉRICO DE OBJETOS**, violence does not disappear, nor does theatre cancel itself out. Theatre and violence are the same reality, and in that sense there is real violence occurring on the stage.

The "spectacle" becomes a convention created by the presence of spectators: the actors seem to be working according to a determined schedule, not because there is a desire to do so but because violence has its own pace—it transforms life into objects and time into a clock. The audience performs its own violence with its demand of a spectacle containing a beginning, middle and end; the actors/manipulators act according to the rules set by our own spectatorial conventions.

Ophelia, unlike Hamlet, is played by a flesh-and-bones actress. We watch Ophelia like voyeurs as she watches us watching her, protected by the cage which, like an open box, signifies the female "other," the madness that sees from its own silence. Ophelia watches, but her thoughts are not visible. She has triumphed incomprehensibly by finding her prison in a cage, surrounded by enormous underground rats that come to peek at her outwardly serene presence. These gross human size rats, played by masked actors, provoke an uncomfortable fascination in the audience; the rats seem to ask us to identify with them. They eagerly light Ophelia's cigarette and set the stage for her female presence, emphasized by the cigarette smoke that rises as it is lit by a vertical spot light. Perhaps Ophelia has seen through the veil of the theatre and willingly transforms her presence into spectacle. She wears a red dress and sunglasses, and in her own spectacle is violated by our gaze. This is a theatre that reveals itself as violence and implicates the spectator by the strategic onstage transformation of "beings" into "objects." Once Ophelia has succeeded in baiting our voyeuristic gaze, she is removed from the stage.

Muller's text is like a musical score with different movements. The author titles the third movement "Scherzo." **MÁQUINA HAMLET** takes the hint quite literally by presenting a sinister dance competition where all female dancers are tall mannequins on wheels. The "performers" demand the applause of the audience (we have come to theatre to have some fun, after all) but while this circus dance becomes increasingly violent we still feel obligated to honor the request of applause by the actors. It is our duty to applaud, because this is theatre, but what about that "theatre" of violence represented in **MÁQUINA HAMLET** by a slide show of the horrors of war and torture? Hamlet the Subject and Ophelia the Object were absent, I believe, from this part of the "show," but we weren't because we are introduced onto the stage when a dummy-spectator is lifted from his seat in the audience and then beaten mercilessly.

The Actor Playing Hamlet is a dummy. He sits in a corner while this "theatre that is a theatre" is replayed with the baby dolls and Barbie dolls pulled out of a trunk and displayed naked, and then beaten up by the manipulators. Within that theatre another theatre, another mind, another eye sees and discovers violence, and repeats it. Violence is always inside, always a theatre, a spectacle.

**MÁQUINA HAMLET** is a theatrical strategy that tries to place a consciousness outside the stages of violence. It shows that such consciousness cannot belong to the spectator, nor to Hamlet the dummy who suffers a sort of self-dismemberment, the logical end of his effort to look at violence as separated from his own theatre. Ophelia, in the end, seems to be the sole witness, but again, she does not belong to our world.

Milton Loayza



an ugly duckling presse

**SOCRATES ON TRIAL**

A dramatic adaptation of Plato's **DIALOGUES**. Through Dec 16, Sat at 4:30PM, Sun at 7:30PM. Theater 22, 54 West 22nd St., 972-0672. \$12

**TINY NINJA THEATER PRESENTS MACBETH**

The Bard's play as told by Ninja figurines. Through Dec 17 Sunday at 3 & 7PM, Monday and Tuesday at 7PM. Present Company, 198 Stanton Street, 420-8877. \$12

**BAAL**

Bertolt Brecht's first play remounted by the Bat Theatre Company. Directed by Jim Simpson Flea Theatre, 41 White Street, 226-2407 Through Dec 16, Thurs-Sat 10PM. \$25, \$20 rush.

**CAT'S-PAW**

A new Don Juan play by Mac Wellman. Starts Dec 15. Soho Rep, 46 Walker St, 479-7979.

release