



THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 13, 2008

The Village on Stage—East 10th Street: Self Portrait with Empty House



The homicidal cohabitates with the hilarious in *East 10th Street: Self Portrait with Empty House*, a one-man show describing the last denizens of the one remaining SRO (Single Room Occupancy) building in downtown Manhattan—a place “no one ever leaves willingly.”

The young thespian narrator and his painterly, mystical sister (who comes to New York to escape the rats in Paris!) must contend with an even more outlandish set. There is Frances, for starters, an antediluvian wet nurse who appropriates the building’s single bathroom, and Donald, the murderous mailman who ambushes her every morning with metronomic precision, dousing her with a blast of roach killer. These misfits and their scatological extravagances make today’s Downtown freaks seem about as dicey as the Bush twins (one of whom in fact lives on the next street over).

A dandy hybrid who could be the love child of Bela Lugosi and le mime Marceau, Edgar Oliver (of La MaMa fame) gives life to the vanished residents of this old-school boarding house with a lot of innuendo and fluid, shifting body language. Freddie Feldman, a diminutive, homicidal cabbalist, gets my vote for reigning psycho-in-residence. When he’s not refilling cans of Maxwell House coffee with an excremental decoction, he strips naked to silently navigate the creaky staircase, which he promptly proceeds to booby trap with empty wine bottles. Oliver’s impersonation of Freddie hugging the walls of the stairwell in the pitch darkness, like a nudist ninja, is both seriously creepy and drôle beyond words. The fellow behind me was still laughing a minute later, prompting a few spectators to attempt to stare him down so we could continue to hear the performance—to no avail. When Freddie disappears, ostensibly to marry an heiress in Upstate New York with fifteen

children, we find out he has only moved to the boiler room. And with that, the whole, dire tragedy of the human condition eventually sinks in, hushing even the hysterical guerilla in the back row. The most striking thing about Oliver's performance is his pitch-perfect delivery. His voice—a deep, gentle tenor—fills the room, carrying with it hints of something else (a fragile vibrato seems to lurk just beneath the surface at times). It propels the entire show with a kind of musical potency. The tranquil mastery with which Oliver crafts his lost world, combined with the narrator's own deep-rooted vulnerability, is profoundly affecting. Olivier breaks down the Fourth Wall with devastating efficacy, not by staggering the audience so much as drawing it in with a singular magnetism.

Not everything flows perfectly in this production. The sound effects by Steve Fontaine were effective, but punctual, which I found jarring at times. Similarly, the music, which came in brief spurts, never succeeded in creating any sense of atmosphere. Finally, the lighting, by David Zeffern, was somewhat monochromatic, and could have benefited from a richer palette—deeper hues and variegated shades to reflect the constantly shifting rainbow of emotions on display on the boards. And yet, the bare-bones effects, like the minimalist set (that is to say empty), were appropriate in their own way, allowing the spectator's own imagination to follow without distraction in the wake of Oliver's recollections—and thus to uncover an unfathomable, boundless province.

There is, perhaps, a pervasive undercurrent of nostalgia in Oliver's play, but the acting never errs toward the cloying or the sentimental. In the end, the hybrid actor and author becomes a polyvalent, shape-shifting bard—a chronicler of lost lives who reveals (as the title of the play suggests) as much about himself as he does about his ensemble of weirdoes. For Oliver, life itself is a stage, and he molds these eccentric personages, who passed through life anonymously, into characters worthy of Shakespeare or Dostoyevsky. The infernal existences of these netherworld inhabitants is captured through an intoxicating prism, that of the narrator's own disarming, poetic sensibility.

by Noah Marcel Sudarsky at 3:03 PM

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