THEATER

by LITA ELISCU

Getting Down on it at La Mama

Remember the days when you could protest and rebel at the same time—say, pre-Lenny Bruce—enjoying the satisfying pain of being alone, against the world . . .? Now, protest isn't tolerated but admired, and everybody wears a button. Bad Bobby may wear long hair, but so does Good Bobby (if he still exists); latecomers surreptitiously turn their rosaries into love beads, remove those mezzuzzahs from the gold chains, and add a shellacked wishbone or maybe a hangnail. In, baby. Yeah, solid.

The world used to be a spectacle sport for the many who helped improve the breed by betting on the entries. Suddenly, everyone has an overwhelming desire to be in this race: the paying customers have decided they can be cut-rate creators and get some of that bread, too. The underground used to be on the periphery, but there's nobody left inside. Once there was a two-way feed-off process. Now replaced by a one-way feedback as the former spectators play their own swan songs and then pay themselves off as though they have done something worth rewarding. The few boobies who at least pretend to stay in the establishment—to preserve the illusion of a two-party system—pay those who scream loudest and serve the most popular big chunks. And the customers eat this regurgitated mental pabulum fed to them from that 'long-handled newspaper spoon' because they don't even know there is anything else. Sometimes, something good is in there but you have to eat the whole mouthful before you know: you just can't trust the headlines. Last week La Mama had a triple-header. I thought I was going to in order to see the two plays by Jan Quackenbush, big shit in London. After I saw the first play by Copi, could have left, because the evening meal was really over.

Once upon every time, especially lately, someone tries to say something if not new at least meaningful about that war in Vietnam, the one they are fighting on the boob tube. "The Cylinder" by Copi, while hardly new or significant had a certain charm, sort of like Pageant Players given a budget. It is intermission-length long but has the force of a powerful emission even as it proclaims a message of impotence. Plastic wrap encases both dummies and live actors. These share top billing with the lighting which does as much to affect the mood as the actors. This is an agitprop drama starring The Green Plasticman, LBJ, and a host of other well-known American types: cheerleaders, mini-skirts, an abominable black snowman (yes, Virginia, there is such a creature, and if he stops on your rooftop, don't let him in). Actors move and speak without stopping while the lights switch crazily in order to focus here, on ranting LBJ and there, on the chanting teeniebopper. These two do a Marsha-John exchange, she saluting and pledging allegiance and honeypots while he drawls in doubletime about a war of attrition and the feeling deeup-in-thuh-marruh-uv-hiz-bones.

There is a big red plastic cylinder in which are dummies and live people, all of whom constantly exchange places. More and more people are put in the cylinder until LBJ is the only one who never is put, or tries to get, inside (and this is the man who said, "Your President is coming . . .?). The play does not build. The lights first go on in the middle of what must be group orgasm; voices chant snatches of old favorites: "2-4-6-8 . . . kill!. . . Oh beautiful for spacious skies . . . You! Get out! Get in! Help! . . ." The play ends with LBJ flapping his plastic arms until he revs into high gear and flakes out, just as all the others reach a new chanted climax and fall to the bottom of the cylinder. Lights out. There is time to smile at the drum majorette, laugh at the ridiculous Green Plastichead. and go wow! maybe once at all the red lights and red plastic. Then the lights go out, and you shrug a little, preparatory to dismissing the brief scene.

It isn't until somewhere in the middle of the next play that one starts remembering this first slight offering, and then finds that besides remembering it, one is forced either to keep thinking about it, free-associate, or else fall asleep. The first Quackenbush is called "Complexions." A misleading title: the play suffers from boring oversimplicity (and lousy Mike Nichols imitation). Two females sit facing across a mirror. They do not mimic each other, but follow an eventualized pattern in the ritual of putting on make-up to create new faces, new personalities. The blonde starts off: "Mummy says I'm mature for my age." The dark-haired girl stays silent, watching this Andy Boy in drag apply more rouge to the spots on her cheeks, more "lipsticker" etc. Then they talk, and blondie gradually her (or tediously for us) becomes more disillusioned as the other girl reveals what the 'true' life of a 'woman' is like. They talk of "trips," each trip a symbol of a new foray into temporary mistresshood, dark glasses and champagne. For some unexplainable reason, they cry or moan through most of this, occasionally swigging scotch from the fifth on the table in order to brace their souls for this confession of sin. It is disclosed there is little a painted woman won't do to hold her men, including changing her hair color and tinted contact lenses according to his ever-waning but chronic desire. About this time Blondie goes from teenie to young woman, which is fortunate, because when she takes off her smock it is impossible to think of her as a mature thirteen-year-old. Anyhow, each removes her smock, as a symbol, stands in black slip, and cries some more, wail and sob, while delicately revealing her story. At the end, daughter is Mummy;

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playmate is Madame Pompadour and, in a final histrionic implosion, both turn out to be two faces of the same Eve—literally, for they both exchange lines and share the same husband. Tra la. They live in a world where men care only for sex, and then only sometimes and always with different partners. For them, childhood was that gay, carefree time before blood was a prayed-for phenomenon; being a woman (or older at any rate) means these "trips", emptiness and alcohol. This play offers nothing but these two chattering characters. Somewhere after the first few lines their lines begin to become interchangeable, it is like trying to separate a Cosmopolitan girl from a John O'Hara bitch: Not only is it impossible, but they are both such fantasies anyway, it isn't worth it. Hoping for an Education, somewhere between that of Henry Adams and Fanny Hill, one gets the best and worst lines from Dear Abby and all Simonne Signoret (breath sigh breath) imitators. With a whole world striving for the reality of love, this play is still trying to locate that X on the map of female orgasm, possibilities of.

The other play is "Inside Out," and no, it is not upside-down; it is just murky. This time, Quackenbush does latch on to a reality—the race issue in America, starring everybody concerned. With three characters and some walk-ons, he hoped to make Ed Sullivan look sick by this attempt to recreate the mood of America, Today on that stage. He fails, mainly because he thinks he can roast the whole pig over a sterno can, and no body in this world can go from Mighty Mouse to Galahad to Man O'War all in one outing. The three leads do give it a try though, and succeed in making a bad play almost worth watching as they go through change after change, jazz musicians with their notes writen by Giuseppe Verdi. Plotline no sooner gets established then it is removed: there are three friends; sometimes they are black. Sometimes they are not friends. They enact various relationships people can have, including interacting with a TV Repairman in a skit which might be called 'Baiting Whitey'—or in this case, Spick. They find themselves in the South at the mercy of a Rod Steigered sheriff. Occurring at intervals, with the force of migraine headaches, are vignettes of pure symbolism, perhaps the best moments of the play because interpretation is left mainly to the actors. Two of them re-enact a dream-fantasy of one: a white horse with black hooves rears and drives his hooves into the hearts of little children unable to scream, but the actor breaks the stillness with shattering agonized cries.

There is a scene in which the local black honkie gets beaten up in awesome, powerful slow motion; very dramatic. The play ends with everyone else closing in on the character who plays this black honkie Mr. Fink. As he screams for help, they symbolically clap hands and walk in a circle, faster and faster.

OK, so nothing is new under the sun, including the midnight sun. Yet this play is dealing with human motivations and actions and somehow manages to entirely ignore sex, real fear, or do more than wave an abstract, limp list at loneliness. This is a great race for the cocktail-conference athletes to run in; there's absolutely no danger of getting wet or muddy.

The plays deal with reality in various invalid, ways resulting in nothing more than the tired eurekas we all have had and put away with the other memories . . . of that first girl, that last bad trip. These experiences all too easily acquire a veneer of unreality until they become part of Everyone's Life, part of that land of the Big lie: like childhood seen from an atrophied condescending perspective; blackness from a whiteness unable to reveal its own fears; or death accepted as maybe being even slightly like 2-4-6-8 . . . kill! Or the neo-Freud "there-there" which praises the healthier aspects of playing with one's self. None make that godawful objective correlative in life which says that there is futility, cheapness and a whole herd of elephant turd on the Yellow Brick Road, but there is some glory there too, because fucking whether good or bad, is always more creative than masturbation, no matter how aesthetic and concerned the latter is. There is no substitute for nitty-gritty.

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