

ing his action to his Navy buddies, Lowell builds a devastating vision of balding "boys" still checking out one another's "figger and waterline," frozen in adolescence by nostalgia and the petty rules and rewards of service life. Though the boy Lowell's sympathies are clearly with his mother (there is no shortage of Oedipal overtones here), the essay exposes her much-valued Old Boston taste as "middle-of-the-road," her social pretensions as laughable and her marital tactics as unscrupulous. Any pity we might feel for the only child of this union between New England snobbery and Annapolis juvenility is held in check by Lowell's depiction of himself as alternately aggressive and thick-skulled, enjoying his mother's attention and his role as a pawn in his parents' fights. As a study of the intricacies of domestic discord, "91 Revere Street" is cold, accurate and ferocious.

Lowell was a great poet of description, and one thing that makes the tensions so vivid in "91 Revere Street" is his startling treatment of inanimate objects, especially clothes and furniture. His picture of the Victorian furnishings the Lowells inherited from relatives is typical:

Here, table, highboy, chairs, and screen—mahogany, cherry, teak—looked nervous and disproportioned. They seemed to wince, touch elbows, shift from foot to foot. High above the highboy, our gold National Eagle stooped forward, plastery and doddering. The Sheffield silver-plate urns, more precious than solid sterling, peeled; the bodies of the heraldic mermaids on the Mason-Myers crest blushed a metallic copper tan. In the harsh New England light, the bronze sphinxes supporting our sideboard looked as though manufactured in Grand Rapids.

Precise, evocative and ironic, Lowell gets *things* to say more about family life than most writers do with whole pages of dialogue. But domestic *angst* is, of course, not the only subject here. "91 Revere Street" is a study in mismatches: between furniture and its setting, between taste and wealth, between a husband and wife, and between the past and the present. The story of a naval engineer who decides to work for Lever Brothers has its interest, but the fact that the man's surname is Lowell gives his decline obvious ramifications. In taking apart his family history, exposing the shoddiness and awkward displacement behind the lofty facade, Lowell

dissects the complex tissue of our New England "aristocracies." Puritan moral rectitude and family-tree exclusiveness go out the window. In a perfect touch near the end of the essay, Lowell imagines his great-great-grandfather Major Mordecai Myers (who, we are told, "had never frowned down in judgment on a Salem witch") announcing to his descendants, "My children, my blood, accept graciously the loot of your inheritance. We are all dealers in used furniture."

Latter-day Romans, inheritors of claptrap and loot—Robert Lowell was able to define better than most writers what we as Americans are. His reviews and essays have an almost old-fashioned element of intellectual responsibility to them. They reflect a time when critics actively interpreted poems and poets actually read what critics wrote. Lowell's attention to tradition, social issues and the subtleties of craft gives his *Collected Prose* energy and lasting value. □

THEATER.

THOMAS M. DISCH

Trash, The City and Death
The Jew of Malta
The Knife
Too Many Girls
Steel Magnolias

Trash, *The City and Death*, by the film director Rainer Werner Fassbinder, has already enjoyed in its native Germany the success of a huge, decade-and-longer scandal, having first been denied performance shortly after it was written in 1974. Soon thereafter it was withdrawn from print by Fassbinder's publisher, Suhrkamp. Its most memorable non-premiere came in 1985, soon after the author's death, when members of Frankfurt's Jewish community formed a human barrier at the front of the stage of the Kammerspiele theater to screen the actors from the audience's view.

Now the play is being previewed before its American premiere in circumstances of almost dreamlike ignominy. It is hard to imagine a worthier setting for *Trash* than ABC No Rio on Rivington Street, a Lower East Side shopfront "theater" with two rows of seats facing a wall of leaking pipes and broken plaster glued together with posters for twenty years of lost causes

and forgotten movies. At regular intervals during the performance the steam pipes upstaged the mumbling actors with shrieks and rattles as though the former occupants of the tenements were joining the protest of their Frankfurt counterparts, and in the scene in which Fassbinder is at his most strenuously offensive the pipes of an overhead toilet began to leak at a galloping tempo, directing the audience's attention toward the ceiling's patchwork of sagging plaster and plastic sheeting and to the large damp area beneath. Through it all, from upstairs, a lively argument was being conducted in Spanish, leading to what sounded like an attempted murder. If Fassbinder had been looking down from heaven, one knew he would have been pleased.

The taboo whose violation has given *Trash* its success of disesteem is its portrayal of a character with the Expressionistically generic name of "a Rich Jew" (which Fassbinder enlarged, after early objections were raised, to "A, The Rich Jew"). A introduces himself to the audience in this wise:

I buy old houses in this city, tear them down, build new ones and sell them for a profit. The city protects me. It has to. I am, first of all, a Jew. The Chief of Police is my friend . . . [also, the Mayor and City Council.] I must not care whether children weep, whether old people are harmed, I must not care. . . . The city *needs* the unscrupulous businessman.

Lest the audience be seduced by A's eloquence and youthful good looks (in the script A is described as ugly and obese, but the same cannot be said for David Tatosian, whose only concession to ugliness is that he dresses as an enemy yuppie in a milieu where punk is the order of the day), Tatosian delivers his first self-damning monologue with his back to the audience as he pisses into a plastic bucket that remains in place through the rest of the act, inches from the first row of seats (Hell has no proscenium).

We may gather from this that A is up to no good, and there is the added dramatic tension of wondering what plans have been made for that bucket. For it is the clear intention of the director, Nick Fracaro, to *épater* us with all the means at his disposal. During the entr'actes of the spoken drama, we are treated to various cabaret songs delivered with full frontal nudity, male and female, to simulations of lesbian sex and to the energetic abuse of the play's heroine, Roma B., by her pimp.

Franz B. None of those spectacles constitutes a theatrical first, however, and it would have been so apposite a gesture in the circumstances, a true objective correlative, for the audience to have been dealt with literally as they were being treated metaphorically. Happily, this was a groundless fear, for in fact the bucket was being reserved for the moment in Act 2 when the cast, rising above their prevailing low spirits, joined together for the ritual humiliation and near-drowning, in that bucket, of the unfortunate Franz (the role played by Fassbinder when his play was made into a film). A little later, heroine Roma B.—who is 13, consumptive and the daughter of a former war criminal now working as a transvestite chanteuse, and, yes, there was incest between them—is garroted by the Rich Jew at her express request, because love's a harsh taskmaster, or something like that. Just as she was explaining the matter, the steam pipes staged their loudest protest.

That doesn't begin to exhaust *Trash's* store of silliness and calculated affronts, yet for all its effort to astonish us, the story, as against the spectacle of its enactment, fails to be interesting, because of a pervasive incoherence. The language aspires to the blasphemous lyricism of Genet, but the result is punk rock, right down to the jangle of the swastika earrings. Fassbinder's script (and much of the debate over the play's banning, as it has appeared in German newspapers, transcripts of which were thoughtfully provided by the theater) would seem to bear out George Steiner's contention that one result of the Nazi era has been the permanent debasement of the German language, in such a way that it can no longer serve as a vehicle for ordinary moral discourse.

"It's only a theater piece," Fassbinder was to argue in his own defense, insisting that "possibly reproachable" methods must be used, or else

you get again something as dead as everything else in the German theater landscape. . . . This play doesn't care about taking certain precautions and I think that's right. I have to be allowed to react to my own reality without regard to anything. If I'm not allowed to do that, then I'm not allowed to do anything at all.

It is the moral position of a teen-ager threatening suicide if he isn't given a camcorder for his birthday; an ego tantrum passing itself off as a *tantum ergo*; and it could not have received a produc-

tion better suited to its merits. Fassbinder was not yet 30 when he wrote *Trash*, reportedly in a single burst of disinclination in flight to Los Angeles, and he went on to make *Berlin Alexanderplatz*, which must be credited as an act of contrition for this particular sin of his youth. So the moral of the story isn't wholly glum: even if Youth must be heard, it does grow up.

By a fine stroke of synchronicity, as *Trash* was premiered at ABC No Rio, *The Jew of Malta* was being presented by the Classic Theatre at the other end of the Off Off Broadway spectrum, in the choir loft of a church on West 86th Street and Amsterdam Avenue. Marlowe's play has in the recent past aroused the protests of those who don't think that literary cachet excuses anti-Semitism, however hoary. This is the play, after all, in which Barabas, another Rich Jew, confesses:

As for myself, I walk abroad
o' nights
And kill sick people groaning under
walls:
Sometimes I go about and poison
wells. . . .
Being young, I studied physic, and
began
To practise first upon the Italian;
There I enriched the priests with
burials,
And always kept the sextons' arms in
use
With digging graves and ringing dead
men's knells.

As delivered, however, with droll understatement by Owen Rackleff, in a modern-dress presentation that remains unexceptionable as long as the play does, Barabas's enormities must be understood to be a mere fantasy of revenge provoked by the depredations of the Maltese. Whether Barabas's past villainies were real or imagined, soon enough he, together with his confederate Ithamore (played with show-stopping panache by Charles Geyer), is giving B'nai B'rith solid grounds for picketing the theater. A shame, really, that there were no such protests, since they might have led to a more extended run. The sponsoring Shakespeare Center and the play's director, Maurice Edwards, deserve high marks for so fully reanimating one of the great corpses of the Elizabethan theater, and for the shoe-string on which the performance was mounted proportional thanks are owed to the New York State Council on the Arts and Con Edison.

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Everyone seems to agree that *The Knife*, the musical drama being offered for Lent at the Public Theater, is a fiasco, but so complete a fiasco that one can't help, as with *Iranganate*, speculating about who's to blame. Mandy Patinkin, as an English Everyman who abandons his identity as husband and father of three to undergo a sex-change operation, is the most visible culprit, since he is almost always before us, moving through his role like a puppet that has snapped all the strings but those that move his jaws and knees. It is as though the surgery that he aspires to were the amputation of his arms rather than his genitalia. But he's not alone in this; most of the cast, with the exception of Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio, moves to the music (one can't say "dances") like robots whose batteries are running down. In terms of energy per stage minute, which should be the basic measure of a musical or why bother, *The Knife* may have set an all-time low.

This doesn't mean that the musical can't aspire to High Seriousness like its older sibling opera. Only that the ceremonial trappings of seriousness—dim lights, low speed, dark clothes and a monotonous, mortuary manner—can't substitute for soul. Soul is less tangible than energy, but usually an audience will register its presence, and on the night I saw *The Knife* the audience did not react to any of the individual songs with so much as a lick of applause, nor was this due to any effort of those on-stage to hasten the action. The show's most effective music is given to the orchestra in moments when it is interpreting mimed action: background music, in effect, and it is no surprise to note that Nick Bicat, the composer, is chiefly noted for producing film scores and incidental music for theater, including most of the plays of David Hare.

If the music was uninspired, the lyrics by Tim Rose Price may be to blame, for I doubt that Schubert himself could have redeemed such doggerel. Price has an unerring instinct for just the wrong tone in any situation. If tenderness is called for, he is bathetic; if thoughtfulness, he can inflate his singsong verses with such portentousness that even Rod McKuen would cry "Hold, enough!" But it is his efforts at satire that are the play's nadir, for then his native lack of humor and verbal wit combine with a cultivated sense of smug superiority to produce lyrics that express the very heart and soul of British twittiness.

Since there is no spoken dialogue in *The Knife*, David Hare, who is credited with the book and the show's direction, would seem, like Reagan, to have some claim to deniability. None of the words we hear is provably his. But when all the other blame is trimmed away, like fat from a bad cut of beef, what remains is still not worth the trouble of cooking. Hare simply doesn't have a handle on his subject. He might as well have invented a story about a man who wishes to be surgically altered into a penguin as into a woman, for all the affective difference it would have made. The show's "emotive" moments are all unearned, as when Patinkin confides to his leading lady:

You scratch the surface like a knife
And show me flashbacks through my life.

And then instead of elucidating what is beneath that surface or what he is flashing back to, he simply repeats the lines with ever more dreadful earnestness. The hollowest moment of all is the last scene when Patinkin, in a dowdy dress, is reconciled with his oldest son, who has till then shown an understandable aversion to his castrated father. No reason is given for the boy's change of heart except the need for terminal uplift to give the audience some pretense for applause when the curtain comes down. Otherwise people might have had the nowadays unheard-of chutzpah to say what most were actually thinking: Boool!

Those whose faith allows less penitential musical fare for Lent would do much better to head uptown to the Equity Library Theatre for its bright and breezy revival of Rodgers and Hart's 1939 tuner, *Too Many Girls*. It is as unprovocative and innocent as a Hershey bar, but its energy-to-stage-minute ratio is quite high, thanks to a score that ranges from agreeable to frolicsome and to performances in the same amiable range. The story concerns four Ivy League football players who ship out to a New Mexico coed college as bodyguards for the ingénue, and then do a lot of singing and dancing, climaxing with a totally irrelevant and kinesthetically irresistible dance number, "Give It [Manhattan] Back to the Indians." Chan Harris and Pamela Khoury as matching Latin Bombshells revive a theatrical stereotype that has almost been lost in the mists of musical comedy history (Desi Arnaz originated Harris's role as Manuelito Lynch), and Carol

Dilley and Robert A. Woronoff, as two nice young people with no connection to the plot, are role models of infectious high spirits. Hart's lyrics are endlessly deft, inventive and singable, and Tim Rose Price should have to spend a century of his time in purgatory copying them on the blackboard, beginning with "I Didn't Know What Time It Was."

The WPA Theater, whose past productions, including *Little Shop of Horrors*, have regularly graduated to other Broadway and Off Broadway theaters, has another contestant in the Most Likely to Succeed category with *Steel Magnolias*, a sentimental comedy set in a beauty parlor in Chinquapin, Louisiana. The six-woman cast is already performing with the ensemble intimacy of an established sitcom team, blending their brassy voices in madrigals of wisecracking humor. As performed by Margo Martindale, Truvy, the operator of the beauty shop, is as authentic a piece of American funk as the set by Edward Gianfrancesco. Truvy gets a lioness's share of the best one-liners, and it is she who is allowed at the last curtain to declare the moral of the story, namely, that laughing through tears is her favorite emotion. You'd have to have a heart of stone to disagree with her at that moment.

The tearful part of the evening is provided by Blanche Baker in the role of Shelby, who has a diabetic fit in the first scene as Truvy is fixing her hair for her wedding. By the second scene Shelby is pregnant against her doctor's orders, and Act 2 has worse in store but no surprises. Robert Harling, in his debut as a playwright, maintains a sure-footed balance between sentiment and buffoonery that many seasoned veterans might envy. The program notes say that Shelby and her mother, M'Lynn, are based on Harling's own sister and mother. One hopes that he comes from an extended family and has many more tales to tell about them.

But if not, his neighbors will do. It is the chance to eavesdrop on the Chinquapin lower-middle-class, middle-aged matrons that is the play's great delight, the music of their bickerings and complacencies, the twang of their jokes. The other instrumentalists in this chorus are Rosemary Prinz as M'Lynn, Mary Fogarty as Ouiser (the grump who declares she is not crazy but only in a very bad mood for forty years), Kate

Wilkinson as Clairee (who shares her recipe for Cuppa-Cuppa-Cuppa: a cup of sugar, a cup of flour and a cup of fruit cocktail with the juice, mix and bake till brown) and as Truvy's po' white assistant Annelle, Constance Shulman, a young actress with a vocal instrument as distinctive as that of Butterfly McQueen. If they gave an Obie for Best Performance by a Team, the six co-stars of *Steel Magnolias* would have little competition. □

MUSIC.

GENE SANTORO

As part of its African Heritage Concerts series, the World Music Institute, in association with WBAI, presented "Blues from the Delta to the Piedmont & Chicago" in mid-March. The program, which opened with blues duo John Cephas and Phil Wiggins followed by famed bluesmen Johnny Shines and Robert Jr. Lockwood, provided some fine music. As its title suggests, it also illuminated by juxtaposition a few key

Cephas and Wiggins. *Dog Days of August*. Flying Fish Records. \$8.98.

Lockwood and Shines. *Hangin' On*. Rounder Records. \$8.98. *Mister Blues Is Back to Stay*. Rounder Records. \$8.98.

aspects of the bedrock form on which so much American music has been built.

Until records and jukeboxes started creating a more homogeneous blues community in the late 1930s, regional blues styles remained fairly distinct. Texas blues, which spawned the likes of Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin' Hopkins and T-Bone Walker, developed ragged, single-string guitar lines to play call-and-response with vocals over a flexible rhythmic flow. In contrast, the guitar-driven blues of the Mississippi Delta, defined by such figures as Charley Patton and Son House, relied on heavier stomps, and created them via syncopations set up between repeating bass figures and the keening, vocalic effects

drawn from a bottleneck or knife used to fret the treble strings. Yet another variety, the Piedmont school, tended toward lighter beats, more emphasis on finger-picking dexterity in ragtimey tunes and a harmonic sense akin to the music of its white hillbilly neighbors.

That Piedmont school finds its latest standard-bearers in guitarist Cephas and harmonica wizard Wiggins, who showed themselves more than equal to their heritage. These younger bluesmen—Cephas is in his mid-50s, Wiggins about 30—have absorbed the Piedmont's recorded tradition. Cephas cites Blind Boy Fuller and Gary Davis as his biggest influences, and the duo paid homage to their musical forebears by playing a number of Fuller's tunes, like "Richmond Blues" and "Mamie Blues," in a manner reminiscent of Sonny Terry and Brownie McGhee. Certainly that guitar/harp pair also serve as important models here: Sonny Terry got his own start playing with Fuller and Davis on Carolina streets, whooping and wailing through his harp while they picked and sang.

And so while Cephas accompanied his rich baritone voice with supple guitar in the gently syncopated Piedmont mode, Wiggins threaded harp lines through the mix, shadowing the vocals with a resonant depth. For his solos on songs like "Stagger Lee" and "Reno Factory" he unleashed a volley of growls and slurs, wails and trills and triple-time train effects that melded bits of Terry and Sonny Boy Williamson and Little Walter into an uncanny and prodigious onslaught. The audience loved it, clapping in time for a tour de force like the old Jimmy Reed Chicago boogie hit "Baby, What You Want Me to Do" and insisting on two encores. "I told you it's great to be back in New York City," Cephas grinned to Wiggins. Once the audience sat back down, they launched into a version of Robert Johnson's "Last Fair Deal Gone Down" that had Wiggins offering his only solo vocal of the show. His tentative voice couldn't deliver a KO, but his harp pyrotechnics could—and did. After an understated guitar spot that duplicated Johnson's bell-like harmonic peals, they slid into a smoothly accelerated tempo that showcased Wiggins's frantic double-time harp chugging. A slower, deeper blues—"One of them dirty downhome kinda things," is how Cephas described it with a smile—displayed shattering bursts of color from the guitar and harp, set

Gene Santoro writes regularly about music for The Nation.

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