

High Raunch

The accomplished vulgarity of 500 Clown's latest

By Tony Adler

July 2, 2009

It may be time I faced facts about my . . . preferences. The other night I saw the Lookingglass's revival of *The Arabian Nights*. When they got to the story about the epic fart, I surprised myself by laughing my ass off. Before that I'd seen Theater Oobleck's *Strauss at Midnight*, which revels in sophomoric provocations like depicting a famous U. of C. philosopher as a dog. In hell.

Delightful. Now there's 500 Clown's *500 Clown and the Elephant Deal*: insane slapstick, reckless forays into the audience, and Molly Brennan as Madame Barker, the salty, corseted mistress of ceremonies, whose signature tune, "My Love Is Coming to Your Town to Kick Your Ass," would be a hit at the piano bar in a biker dive. Loved it. Evidently I'm not quite the aesthete I thought I was.

Not that I couldn't go on fooling myself. Like the other two shows, *500 Clown and the Elephant Deal* is an incredibly smart piece of work. Let's just say that gross jokes and knock-down shtick are part of its sophisticated theatrical vocabulary.

The show started out as an adaptation of *Man Is Man*, Brecht's early play about a poor slob named Gaily Gay who gets brainwashed and reconstituted as the perfect soldier. But according to 500 Clown member Paul Kalina, quoted in the *Daily Herald*, that "just wasn't interesting us." What they ended up with instead is Madame Barker doing her cabaret act, backed by a solid three-piece band and four worshipful but bumbling stagehands who find themselves hanging helplessly from scaffolds a lot. Oddly coquettish despite her raunchy repertoire, Madame Barker changes into yet another elaborate costume for each number—an outfit with a shark headdress, for instance, to sing about you bringing your rod to her fishing hole.



And yet Man Is Man still lurks in there. Kalina's Shank—as worshipful and bumbling as any of the others, at first—gets turned by a tango into a sexy brute, dragging his aroused fellow stagehand Viola around by the hair. It's funny for a while. But Shank's dance develops a convincingly sadistic edge even as Viola's becomes more uncertain, and soon he's standing atop the scaffolding in a black and red duster, looking like a figure out of a Frank Miller comic and barking challenges to his former compadres. Gaily Gay transformed.

Hand guns—the kind with fingers for barrels—are brandished. Shank squares off against his former pal Bruce; the ensuing fight has to be one of the most disturbing things I've ever laughed at. A common circus bit—where one performer is held upside down by his partner and they go head-over-heels with each other—becomes a vision of apocalypse in microcosm when Shank and Bruce do it, at once mutually dependent and warring.

It doesn't stop there. Nothing seems to stop anywhere. Initially a kind of soft jungle gym on which the cast plays gags, the audience becomes a refuge when Shank, traumatized, rebels against his soldier persona. (Don't see this show unless you're prepared to get climbed on, maybe even rampaged over.)

500 Clown are known for their bruising style of acrobatics, characterized by a ruthless disregard for heights, what looks to the rest of us like pain, and the limits of endurance. But under the direction of Leslie Buxbaum Danzig, the players—some of whom, full disclosure, have taught and performed at The Actors Gymnasium, which I cofounded—have achieved not only a new level of physical subtlety and precision (watch how they manipulate their imaginary guns) but emotional authenticity. Kalina's trajectory from average shlub to monster to desperate soul powerfully carries the show. Matt Hawkins's open-faced stagehand Cheetah is heartbreaking when he becomes a Pagliacci figure without the makeup, dancing through his disenchantment. And the changes that flash across the face of Jessica Hudson as the essentially trusting Viola remind me of those films of cloud movements speeded up. If this is vulgarity, give me more.