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Review of "From Dawn till Night"

Doris Mirescu and her theatre troupe Dangerous Ground have been making multimedia theatre/performance art for several years now; though aspects of Mirescu's aesthetic remind me of the works of many contemporary companies from International WOW to 3LD, it's clear that she has a startling vision and talent that's all her own. It is for this reason that you may want to venture to the undergroundzero festival to see her current opus, a dense and often willfully obtuse piece entitled From Dawn Till Night. The downside: the show is nearly two hours long, the venue (P.S. 122's upstairs space) is un-air-conditioned and has poorer acoustics than we might wish for, and there is much that happens on stage and/or screen that seems uncomfortable for actors or viewers or both (e.g., a filmed scene that depicts what seems to be the slaughter of a horse; a love-making scene in which two live half-naked actors writhe and struggle on a bed and we know they're hotter and tired than we in the audience are). But the upside of seeing From Dawn Till Night is the abundant evidence of Mirescu's visionary take on how theatre and other media can be made to intersect, collide, and coalesce, in ways more interesting than are usually offered. For me, the most exciting moment of the play came when one character, more or less centerstage, asked another character for a light for her cigarette. What made this unusual was the fact that the second character was in a bathroom all the way upstage, actually out of our view for the most part; but this second character was being filmed and projected live on screens in the visible area of the stage. And what made this special was that the characters seemed to understand that they were occupying separate and shared spaces simultaneously. What possibilities such an approach to juxtaposing film and live actors portends!

In fact, From Dawn Till Night plays with time and space and perception constantly. For much of the play, the man who is filming the action is the focal point on stage (rather than the action he's filming); I never really understood why, but it was interesting. (And when that man, Gene Gallarano, occasionally put down the camera to merge into the story, I thought that was interesting, too, though again I wasn't sure why he was doing this at those particular moments.) Actors move freely through the fourth wall, and change costume in front of us, many times (if the sight of bare female breasts offends you, consider yourself warned now). Action plays out simultaneously in what appears to be different times (characters' memories?). A soundscore, designed by Marshall Miller, presses our emotional buttons with familiar pop tunes (Elvis, in several places) and what sounds like old-fashioned movie melodrama background music. (And there's a big thing that looks and behaves like a jukebox on the stage as well.)

The design is shockingly complicated and detailed, more than you ever expect to see in a festival environment. I discovered afterward that much of that design is closely copied from the Fassbinder film which has inspired this production, A Year with 13 Moons. The narrative follows that film as well: the story of a man who, after being rejected by a straight man he loved, had a sex change operation. I'm not sure that Fassbinder's screenplay proves worthy of the attention Mirescu and Company have given it, for from where I sat it felt too often like a parody of bad European movies of the second half of the 20th century. (I'm no aficionado; forgive me if this is one of your favorite films!)

Indeed, I would love to see Mirescu bring her remarkable ideas and skills to something new and thoroughly contemporary. Her work suggests a theatre that can be joltingly relevant in the internet age, and I am eager to see her tackle something fresh and uncharted.

Martin Denton