

From Curtain Up
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A *CurtainUp* Review
Panic! (How to Be Happy)
by Jenny Sandman

And so the spectator's question should not be, What does this play mean? The question should be, In response to which of the world's possibilities and tensions is this play created? --Richard Foreman, *Unbalancing Acts*

'When I use a word,' Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean--neither more nor less.'

'The question is,' said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'

'The question is,' said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master--that's all.'

--Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*

You too can shipwreck on golden reefs.

--Richard Foreman, *Panic! (How to Be Happy)*

DJ Mendel and Tea Alagic
(Photo: Paula Court)

All hail Richard Foreman. Not only has he consistently been off-off-Broadway's strangest of the strange for the past thirty years or so, but this year, he has managed to out-weird even himself. Though all Foreman productions resemble an acid trip made flesh--a particularly vivid one, at that--in *Panic* it seems he is almost daring the audience to try and decipher his fevered imaginings. Foreman is usually regarded as either a lunatic or a postmodern genius. In the tradition of Brecht and Mac Wellman, he proudly eschews "traditional" American theatre--that is, the sort of bland formulaic mush that produces a nice safe emotional catharsis, wrapped up in nice safe familiar story with no loose ends, that is then easily forgotten upon leaving the theater. Foreman's is a true theater of excess, one which cannot be summarized or translated into other media. In his latest book, *Unbalancing Acts*, he wrote, "I want a theater that frustrates our habitual way of seeing. The truth of art is in the audience's, the individual's, awakened perceptions. It is not in the work of art."

This may all sound very literary and intellectual and boring as hell, but trust me, a Foreman show is anything but boring. *Panic* has no traditional plot, so there is none to explain here; suffice it to say that it looks like "Pirates of the Caribbean" on smack, and sounds like a nightmare in a mental hospital. There is more overt lewdness in this show than there has been since his Bad Boy Nietzsche. It is full of giant phalluses and phallic symbols, simulated oral sex, sex, and masturbation, whipping, and stories that begin with "There once was a man with a prick." There's some naughtiness involving a horse, too.

The show is a sensory barrage; there are phones ringing, glass breaking, flashes of light, warning buzzers, bits of overamplified and distorted music, and different

voices repeating random fragments of text. The stage is hung with two-foot Victorian dolls and drawn curtains, painted with esoteric eyes and lettering over white and black stripes, and dripping with pearls, ladders, bulls-eyes, secret closets, playing cards, and bits of string which bisect the whole thing into small parts. The actors have a strange assortment of props, including huge cutouts of faces, a giant, jingling bee, eight pairs of white balls, a blue baby on a throne suspended from the ceiling. They wear intricate layers of rags, leg wrappings, turbans, pirate hats, and occasionally swords. Since there is no text to interpret or story to portray, the actors' performances are more like demonstrations. But they move and emote fluidly, and are riveting to watch, especially D.J. Mendel and Tea Alagic. One of the many lines shouted during the course of the play is, "Watch this, you bastards!" But that is unnecessary--it is impossible to look away. The play builds to a crescendo of general chaos at the end, and is the theatrical equivalent of a circus train derailment.

Curiouser and curiouser, as Alice said. The trick to enjoying a Foreman show is to sit back and let it wash over you--if you attempt to look for meaning or logic, you're doomed. Foreman calls his show "a vaudeville of impulsive human behavior." *Panic* is very vaudevillian, and impulsive, and joyous, and really weird, and is like nothing else you will ever see. And because of that, it is not to be missed.