

Canes, onions, & machine guns

by Arthur Sainer

The Barking Rooster Theatre, the brainchild of Avram Patt, was born earlier this year in Plainfield, Vermont, at the time that the Bread & Puppet Theatre was breaking up or transforming itself. (Uncertain whether Peter Schumann will keep the Bread & Puppet name in his new pieces. What's a name?) From what I can gather, Barking Rooster is a kind of ad-hoc collection of Vermonters, several of whom were Bread & Puppeters. Barking Rooster performed its present work, "NOT AFRAID OF FALLING," during the long, marathon-like final Bread & Puppet weekend at Cate Farm, Goddard College, this past July, then toured in Appalachia, and has now come to New York for a three-week run at Theatre for the New City, plus street and park performances of its "Singing Cricket," which is based on a Woody Guthrie tale.

"Not Afraid of Falling" is a dramatization of the Peretz story, "If Not Higher." Like other Peretz work, it's a curious marriage of mysticism and kitchen wisdom. A young Jewish man journeys from his native village to the town of Nemirov to see at first-hand the holy doings of the Rabbi of Nemirov. The more orthodox Jews around have scoffed at the legendary Rabbi and even the young man grows skeptical when he arrives in Nemirov, for the townspeople inform him that the Rabbi can't be seen now. It's Yom Kippur and on this High Holy Day, the Rabbi leaves his congregation and journeys to Heaven. There he visits the angels and the Almighty Himself. In responding to the young man's disbelief, the townspeople assure him that the Rabbi goes at least to Heaven, "if not higher." The visitor decides to uncover the secret acts of the Rabbi of Nemirov during Yom Kippur and he enters the Rabbi's house and hides under the Rabbi's bed and waits for him to appear. The remainder of the tale involves a series of strange actions and strange journeys which I am not going to give away here—you won't have to hide under the bed of any rabbi to learn the rest of the story but you also won't get it from me—and these journeys and actions tell us something about the nature of virtue and sin, if I understand the story correctly, and what it behooves a holy man to be doing on the High Holy days when God wipes the slate clean and forgives men their sins for the preceding year.

There is a lovely primitive quality to the work of this young company, most an awkward innocence which its very nature suggests a gentle spirituality. There is also an awkwardness which sometimes gets in the way of the performance but this eases as the company grows more comfortable in what is at present a foreign space to it. The rudimentary spills over to its props (canes, onions, machine guns) its set (clouds, stoves, trees), its primitive theatrical curtains.

There is a truly arresting performance by Margo Sherman as the Rabbi of Nemirov. This young girl

Not Afraid of Falling
A play based on the I. L. Peretz story "If Not Higher," adapted and directed by Avram Patt for the Barking Rooster Theatre, at the Theatre for the New City, 113 Jane Street.

Pure Desire
Five dream stories and dream improvisations, with music and sound composed by Melissa Shifflett, directed by Jim Shifflett, at the Performing Garage, 33 Wooster Street.

takes on age, growing infirmity, and the transcendence past fear and trembling, the spirituality past earthly ailment in a manner which redeems much of the theatrical tinsel one is subject to year after year. It is a caring, unadorned, focused performance, it speaks of the tensions of the soul, the soul opening itself in blindness and in faith.

Avram Patt has written and directed the work in lovely, homely ways. There is a delightful devil's prologue in which apples turn into onions, but there is no sleight-of-hand, we see a real stage devil with a real stage devil's tail making the apple-to-onion switch on the waiter's plate. When the visitor hides under the rabbi's bed, he makes himself comfortable with a thermos bottle of coffee and an ashtray for his cigarettes. The play is filled with little homely touches that keep belief



—Abner Symons

Sid Blum;
"NOT AFRAID OF FALLING"
from puffing up and sailing off into insufferable piety. There is an element of confusion, however, which the company would do well to straighten out—I could not always separate set changes from action—but on the whole Barking Rooster, which includes Susan Bettman, Sid Blum, Trudi Cohen, Carlene Fernandez, and Larry Siegel, is offering us a lovely gift from the hills of Vermont for the new season.

From Plainfield to Chicago, and another import, this time at the Performing Garage. The Dream Theatre, founded four years ago by Jim Shifflett, is a good contrast to Barking Rooster. The Dream Theatre, with "PURE DESIRE," dramatizations of several dream

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...the story...
...Shifflett has the makings of a good company. These are good former, Beth Leonard, D Moore, Yasha Novak, Bari Robin, and Harold Yee, they certainly move, they can pro humor, but there is presently viable theatrical concept to suggest them. I won't get into my own things about dramatizing dreams, I written about that before and thus I'm not too keen on the idea it's an impossible one. But there's presently a seriousness lacking and tendency to rely on easy theatre answers. Let's hope in the future it these young people can break out their mannerisms and begin struggling with what the theatre has struggle with—not the pleasing of audience but the rediscovery and reformation of the world outside theatre.

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