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MOVIES, PERFORMING ARTS/WEEKEND DESK

THEATER REVIEW; In This Mind's Décor, Sex Is No Love Seat

By BEN BRANTLEY

The décor has changed a bit since this time last year. There are playing cards on the walls now and an army of dolls with long golden curls on the ceiling. But in many ways, the old place looks the same -- creepy, disorienting and astonishingly familiar.

It's both somewhere you would never consider living and somewhere you have lived all your life. Yes, you are back in Richard Foreman's dream house, one of the prime pieces of surreal estate in Manhattan.

Every winter Mr. Foreman, who has been practicing his particular, highly potent brand of theatrical witchcraft for more than three decades, reassembles his idea of the interior of the human mind in the tiny Ontological Theater space at St. Mark's Church. And every winter pilgrims of the avant-garde show up for a dose of senses-scrambling spectacle, much as other people attend the Christmas show at Radio City Music Hall. Like their Midtown counterparts Mr. Foreman's fans are rarely disappointed.

The title of the new show that officially opened last night is "Panic! (How to Be Happy!)." The promise within the parentheses is deceptive, of course. "Panic!" is filled with all sorts of wise-sounding statements, often spoken in sepulchral voice-overs by Mr. Foreman, which have the tantalizing quality of phrases half-remembered from dreams.

There are dotted lines and strings segmenting the play's ornate puzzle of a set, suggesting there must be some assured ordering principle at work, if you could only figure it out. But the disconnected, questing characters in "Panic!" end up as bewildered and hopeful as they begin. Such, in Mr. Foreman's world, is life: one long comedy of exasperation.

There are four main performers in "Panic!," attired in ways that bring to mind a nightmare version of "The Pirates of Penzance." The men (Robert Cucuzza and D. J. Mendel) look like music hall brigands; the women (Tea Alagic and Elina Löwensohn) like mangled variations on the standard Victorian virgin and vamp.

A chorus of battered refugee types move in hieroglyphic formation and rearrange the strange, bulky objects that might be called, for want of a better word, furniture.

Human eroticism, a dominant aspect of Mr. Foreman's work in recent years, is given especially literal-minded representation here, as the men and women couple like colliding trucks and probe one another with swords. The oversized phallic and vaginal symbols (the latter accessorized with a flitting giant bee) suggest the work of an overzealous sex-education teacher, though "Panic!" is perhaps not the show for introducing children to the facts of life.

Not that the play makes the pursuit of carnal pleasure seem remotely rewarding. The impeccably precise principal players, who move and speak with the mannered zeal of automatons in search of their inner humanity, clearly get no satisfaction from sex. They seem rather lonely, actually, though not entirely despairing.

"This is my ticket to a better life," says one of the women in a whisper filled with great expectations. The men keep on trying to climb a mountain (that's right) at the back of the stage even though they always fall from their ropes. And everyone responds happily to the arrival of unsightly comestibles like a ravaged Miss Havisham-style wedding cake and some fungoid substance identified as bread. "Here's tomorrow's baked goods," explains the voice-over on several occasions, "stale already."

Another repeated statement, delivered in a Mickey Mouse falsetto and spliced by a wide pause: "Let's all join . . . the misfit club." In "Panic!," even more than in most Foreman productions, it feels as if the world is made up of nothing but misfits, that no one is meant to find a comfortable niche in a life that will always thwart and confound.

That Mr. Foreman always extracts such joyous showmanship from this gloomy premise is one of the continuing miracles of contemporary New York theater. "A new perspective can only repeat old patterns," says the voice-over in "Panic!" While this may be true, Mr. Foreman's continuing shift of perspectives, unlike tomorrow's baked goods, never feels stale.

PANIC! (HOW TO BE HAPPY!)

Written, directed and designed by Richard Foreman; stage manager, Evan Cabnet; assistant stage manager, Joshua Briggs; technical director, Michael Darling; sound and lights by Mr. Foreman; costumes by Kasia Walicka Maimone; assistant costume designer, Kathrine Wong. Presented by the Ontological-Hysteric Theater. At St. Mark's Church, 131 East 10th Street, East Village.

WITH: D. J. Mendel (Nikos), Elina Löwensohn (Luminitza), Tea Alagic (Svetlana)
and Robert Cucuzza (Umberto).

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