

★ 190 CASTING NOTICES THIS WEEK! ★

SHOW BUSINESS

Established 1941

The Original Casting Weekly for the Performing Artist

March 17 - 23, 1999
No. 9 • \$1.50

AT CALL TIME

Cover Story.....p. 8

C. Durang Q&A.....p. 6

Drama Desk.....p. 33

New Casting.....p. 3

Faith Prince &
Cy Coleman.....p. 5

NYC Films in
Development.....p. 28

CONTACT INFORMATION FOR:

CASTING DIRECTORS

TALENT AGENCIES

TV & FILM STUDIOS

COMEDY CLUBS

ACTORS' UNIONS

UPDATED WEEKLY!

NO FEE CASTING NOTICES

Show Business will run your casting notices at no charge. Fax or mail by 12 noon Friday. Fax to: 212-475-3591



STAGES? WE DON'T NEED NO STINKIN' STAGES!



BE A CONTENDER: • Boxing Training for Men and Women • Free Weights • Cardiovascular
• Trainers on Premises • Daily Classes • Immaculate Facilities • Affordable Rates

The Water Front Boxing Club • 44 New Street, NYC 10004 212.344-5656

TRADITION TAKES A BACKSEAT TO INNOVATIVE STAGING

A Look at Popular Unconventional Theater

By Dana Burnell

What's wrong with the traditional way of staging? A lot, seems to be the growing consensus of performers in New York. By traditional, we're talking about the basic proscenium stage with orchestra pit, red velvet curtain, and row seating for the audience. What's wrong with it? Well, who besides Disney has the money for that type of real estate? Who in the audience has a sense of connection with that type of formality? And, in a world where most entertainment takes place in a contained box, an increasingly important part of the theater-going experience has become the blurred line (and growing connection) between performers and audience.

Of course, the move away from the proscenium arch is not viewed as revolutionary by those familiar with theater history. Theater is said to have begun in walled amphitheaters as a form of worship of the wine-puzzling god Dionysus, with unusually self-effacing actors reciting their lines as a chorus and standing in a circular pit at the base of semicircular auditorium. Later the role of the chorus was diminished and Hellenistic actors strode the boards enclosed in a raised stage known as the *proskenion*, providing catharsis and looming large in 2-foot platform shoes.

The Romans removed many of the religious and tragic associations with theatre, specializing in bawdy farces staged in grandiose enclosed auditoriums. The Christian Church banned theatre for several centuries, until drama returned in the 9th Century in the form of liturgical plays performed in market places, and on mobile stages mounted on horse-drawn wagons.

The modern, bust-the-bank type of staging came into being in 1618 in Parma, Italy, when Gian-Battista Aleotti built a proscenium arch as the focus of blocks of audience seating. From there it wasn't long before the invention of gaslight allowed nocturnal performances as well as increased distance between performers and their audience. Centuries passed, and the next thing you know, Ethel Merman's leaning over the orchestra pit, bellowing "There's No Business Like Show Business," out to a faceless crowd two zip-codes away from her. It got that ugly... and that distant from the reality of our lives.

Thankfully, the pendulum swung back the other way, and by economic necessity the 1930s Federal Theatre Branch of the Work Projects Administration produced innovative theater with a small budget and big ideas. Financial necessity spurred the artists in the Federal Theatre on to the development of experimental theater in the United States. Welles' Mercury Players and Lee Strasberg's Group Theater re-connected with audiences. The Beat Generation shunned formal staging, requiring only words to make their point. "Happenings" in the 60s and Performance Art offered an alternative to theater but somehow couldn't replace the play-going experience. What needed to be updated was the context.

Nowadays, some directors use theater space as a form of post-modern comment upon the need for theater, upon what type of public demand creates and abandons a particular space, and what that says about a certain social or political atmosphere. The Roundabout Theater's production of *Cabaret* at Studio 54 is a high-budget example of this type of innovative staging, with a set both deconstructed and reconstructed, and audience interaction in one of its more creative and (praise God) least intrusive forms. *Cabaret's* entire audience is cast — well-cast, for once — as a theatrical audience in a declining and corrupt political atmosphere. Oddly enough, I felt we could handle that.

Alan Cummings as the Emcee saunters amongst the crowd bare chested — except for some deeply provocative nipple sequins — and lounges on overhead catwalks to

engage in some casual fondling of the famous all-girl band. Cummings does commit the often painful and usually cruel act of bringing several audience members on stage, but the line between actors and audience is so minimal throughout *Cabaret*, and Cummings treats the selected victims with such graceful humor (and releases them so quickly) that, for once, the enforced participation does not immediately suck all oxygen out of the performance space.

And what a space it is! The set designer, Robert Brill, has spoken of "resuscitating" theatres around the country in order to stage *Cabaret* with the proper atmosphere: he recently gutted the Wilshire in Los Angeles, where *Cabaret* will be staged this Spring, removing all orchestra-level theater seating and replacing the row seats with terraced floors and cafe tables.

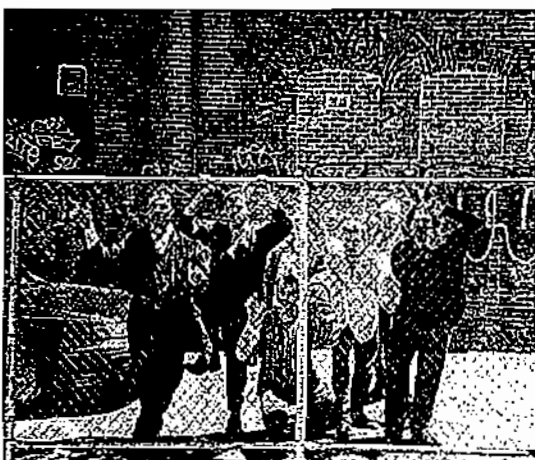
Here in New York, Brill was particularly fortunate with Studio 54. When the *Cabaret* production took over the space in the midst of its acclaimed run, Brill and his colleagues discovered a rich history buried beneath '80s tat and '70s Disco legend. The Studio 54 space had, according to Brill, "originally been constructed in 1927 as the Gallo Opera House, and by the early 1930s it had been turned into a Casino de Paris cabaret nightclub... so they had cabaret tables and chairs, and a band out in the house orchestra area." In other words, the *Cabaret* mood had been set long ago.

And what about that later, more famous incarnation of the *Cabaret* space at West 54th Street? "Well, not that much really remains of Studio 54. I mean, when it was Studio 54 the architecture was there, of course, but it was all painted black. There aren't really any good photographs of the interior of Studio 54, which is amazing. Even when they shot that film there recently, there was never a master shot where you could see any of the interiors. And in the '80s there was a great deal of construction done. So when we went into the space in September, we did a lot of demolition work."

In what is now the front orchestra area of the former disco, the walls were covered with black dry wall all the way to the ceiling, and there were two mammoth air conditioning ducts which thrust out into the space to cool the nightclub. Last fall, when Brill's construction team pulled away the dry wall, they found the original Gallo House architecture intact behind it, all ruined balconies and tattered facades. This gorgeous decay was perfect, according to Brill, "Instead of trying to restore and distress it, we decided to make it site specific, and use that to our advantage."

It worked brilliantly: The space of *Cabaret's* Kit Kat Club — and therefore that of Studio 54 — has a feeling to it that is both tawdry and historic, with a flavor of inevitability to the decay. The non-restored balconies contrast with seedy grandeur to the leopard skin banquettes, to the tasseled red-shaded lamps, the black clad cell-phone clutching audience. The chandeliered entrance and lavish bar leads us into a space which seems to darken as the evening goes on, connecting the audience to the vulnerability of pleasure-seeking.

At *De La Guardia*, (formerly known as Villa Villa) an Argentinean troupe's production at the Daryl Roth Theatre, there is not only no stage — there are no seats. Adding to this mosh-pit atmosphere, audience members



Shakespeare in The Parking Lot: In *Julius Caesar*, actors make good use of outdoor space for dramatic effect down on Ludlow street.

are warned before hand to check coats and bags, and to watch out for belongings. If the guy standing next to you doesn't slam into you a few times, you've missed the *De la Guardia* experience. Up to 500 audience members stand in the center of an enormous, undecorated room which looks as if it was formerly the site of some solemn business concern (it was a bank, actually), and wait for the show to start.

Having nothing else to look at, your eye is eventually drawn to the ceiling: the opaque paper surface seems to rustle with movement, and shadows play intermittently across its entire length. Soon it becomes clear that something really is going on up there. Some audience members seem almost gleeful with anticipation (*De la Guardia* has fanatical regulars who see the show on a monthly or even weekly basis), while others appear to be nervously checking the exit. A soft percussive tapping begins, sounding like the heavy drops of rain which precede an electric storm. Suddenly the opaque ceiling rips open, and an enormous hand reaches out towards the audience, the ceiling splits in another section, and a gargoyle of a head pops out, grinning and gnawing on a large insect. The rain-like tapping is replaced by an ear-splitting, exciting beat of jungle drums and *De la Guardia* explodes into action. Explode is the word for it. The show is designed to produce sensory overload, the feeling of being caught in a dream state and the dream alternates between our most lush fantasies and our basest urges. Spectators watch in fascination as the show breaks open into a chaos of flight and pursuit as nine rope-suspended performers alternately soar and crawl the walls. They join together to form nightmarish figures which hover just out of the audience's grasp, and then separate to chase each other through gusts of wind and scatterings of rain-fall. *De la Guardia* is perhaps best known for being the show where an audience member is snatched up into the arms of a near-naked performer and flown off towards the ceiling, a la Esmerelda in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*. The audience screams and begs to be chosen, throwing their faces up towards the wind and rain, imploring the aerialist to select them — the whole image is one of souls in hell imploring to be lifted from their state, and it is one hell of a good time.

The show was developed in Buenos Aires rock clubs by Pichon Baldimu and Diqui James, actors who were looking to bring the vitality of club life to the theater. James has said that he and Balimu "wanted people to have the feeling that anything could happen. . .we do not want the audience to just stand there thinking they are safe." The sense of oppression and then exuberance comes from the emotional experience of Argentina's release from dictatorship, but no one is expected — or desired — to experience *De la Guardia* on such an analytic level. *De la Guardia* is about fantasy, rhythm, and visceral reaction.

The Expanded Arts Theatre on Ludlow Street offers all kinds of innovative and unusual staging solutions to their very New York problem — lack of money, lack of space. Expanded Arts works out of a storefront theatre, and uses the box covering a radiator in front of their window as "stage", one which must occasionally be uncomfortable to



We treat limitations as opportunities, and work to create art where it might least be found.



stand on for long, and which is about three feet wide by four feet. This radiator doubles as a window seat/or bed for other stagings, and also as a stove when a little door on the front of it is opened to reveal a glowing light.

With very few imaginative limits, Expanded Arts is also not limited by their prescribed space. In a production of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir walks out of the Expanded Arts door and tries to hail a cab on Ludlow Street. Expanded Arts performed Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* beginning in the lobby next door to the theater, and moved through the dressing rooms to the theater. In *Julius Caesar*, the crowd scenes were done out the window.

In their 94 Plays in 94 Days Festival, the Expanded Arts Theatre performs around three plays a night. Audiences

A moment of repose for actors (from top to bottom) Meredith Basinger, Tim Ellis and Janice Orlandi in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* at Expanded Arts.



will leave for a break between shows, and return to find the radiator-top proscenium transformed into a small arena theater. For the third show of the evening, the chairs will be scattered around the room in small bunches, and actors roam about the room moving amongst the audience.

Expanded Arts moves entirely out of their space during summer performances of Shakespeare in the Parking Lot, which is a neighborhood favorite with the Bard's plays presented in a municipal parking lot on Ludlow Street. Chairs are set up for the audience, but people also bring blankets and pillows, and enjoy a picnic while watching the performances. NYC streetlights provide the lighting, and the actor's entrances are made in a site-specific manner — namely, on cars, motorcycles, and roller blades. It's hard to improve on the thought of Petruccio in *Taming of the Shrew* arriving in a Yellow Cab, or of the players in *Hamlet* driving up in a battered old car with the stereo cranking out show tunes.

The Shakespeare in the Parking Lot performances allow Expanded Arts to live up to their name — they happily expand into the huge space, and use it to add layers of modern meaning to Shakespeare's plays. In *Macbeth*, Birnam wood is the brick wall covered in graffiti which borders the back of the municipal parking lot. The soldiers camouflage themselves with painted screens and blend in with the wall — soon, their slow movement forward creates a rippling pattern of brick and graffiti as Macbeth's enemies close in upon him.

Expanded Arts Theater says that they treat "limitation as opportunities", and work to create art where it might least be found. They have staged huge chase scenes, with actors running around the block and arriving back to the parking lot on cue; they perform scenes which begin from across the street and move into the parking lot; they use their audience's perception of the city in surprising ways. In their staging of *Hamlet*, a homeless man in the parking lot turned out to be an actor, and metamorphosed into the Ghost of Hamlet's father.

The Gorilla Rep Theater also stages outdoor performances of Shakespeare, most famously their *Midsummer Night's Dream*, which has been performed in Washington Square Park for a decade now. The *Midsummer* performances begin in the southwest corner of the park, but the audience can't settle down with a picnic, because this is a travelling show. Cast members are aware of the many distractions fighting for their audience's attention (car radios, drunken arguments, the yen to go for a falafel), and keep the audience with them by making them part of the performance. Rhetorical questions about plot developments will be tossed their way, and in the case of scene changes, an actor will sometimes simply throw an arm around your shoulder and lead you to the next location.

Christopher Sanderson, the founder and Artistic Director of Gorilla Rep, says that his goal from the start was to "create the highest quality productions of classical theater with a contemporary feel, for people where they are." On good nights, when the weather is agreeable and the distractions minimal, Gorilla Rep succeeds at this remarkably well. Their production of Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* last summer was a well orchestrated and neatly updated version of a play which seemed remarkably timely. There was only one cast/ audience scene change, which helped maintain the sense of the Ranevsky's doomed passivity. . . these are after all the people who "do nothing but drink vodka and theorize and complain about how depressed we are." Add a pack of Marlboro lights, and it sounds like a night at the Beauty Bar.

For an entirely different pastoral Shakespearean experience, you couldn't do much better than taking your battered old street-parked car up to the Berkshires for a day of classical theater in a millionaire's environment. This summer will be the twenty-second season of Shakespeare & Company's performances at Edith Wharton's turn of the century Berkshire estate, The Mount.

Shakespeare & Company will be presenting fourteen productions this season on six indoor and outdoor stages. How does the space at Edith Wharton's estate influence the theater experience? A Manhattanite described her trip up to see Shakespeare & Company's all-female staging of *Henry IV* a few seasons back: "The performance was in a barn, and it was a bit of a walk. Moving through these woods, you already begin to feel



Nashed Fared as Puck in the parking lot at Expanded Arts' ongoing summer Shakespeare program.

the magic of a space transformed, and by the time you get to the theater, you already feel you're in another world. And the play was extraordinary."

Sadly, in a few years Shakespeare & Company will lose their lease to perform at the Mount. The administration is of course unhappy about that loss, but they are using the time they have available to really pull out the stops. This summer they will perform the aptly named *Love's Labor Lost* in the gardens of the estate, as well as *Summer*, Edith Wharton's erotically-charged story of the Berkshires, which will take place August through October at the Stables.

Parking lots, municipal parks, barns, stables, and discos make it clear that all the world really is a stage. Once the weather warms up, Shakespeare will be hitting the streets for many of the best productions this city has to offer. Until then, keep warm in the mosh-pit at *De La Guardia*. Maybe you'll get lucky and some bare-hummed Argentinian will snatch you up for a quick spin around the ceiling.



CABARET
Roundabout Theater
254 W. 54th St.
(212) 869-8400
Tue. - Sat. Evenings at 8pm
Wed., Sat., and Sun.
matinees at 2pm
Tickets \$25-\$80

DE LA GUARDA
The Daryl Roth Theatre
20 Union Square East
(212) 375-1110
Tues. - Sun.
Tickets \$37.50 weekdays,
\$45 Weekends,
(\$20 tickets/day of the show.)

EXPANDED ARTS THEATRE
85 Ludlow Street
(212) 253-1813
Call for performance schedule

MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM 10TH ANNIVERSARY
Gorilla Rep Theater Company
Southwest Corner of Washington Square Park or Henry St. Settlement courtyard.
466 Grand Street, Lower East Side
(212) 330-8086

SHAKESPEARE AND COMPANY
The Wharton Estate,
The Mount
Lenox Mass.
(413) 637-3353
May through October 91
www.shakespeare.org