GLORIOUS WOODSTOCK FRINGE

Kingston Freeman, September 7, 2003

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Reviewer

WOODSTOCK – Folks along the Hudson's west bank and distant as Gotham and New Have sighted a weird luminosity pulsing across the northwest horizon commencing in broad day. Rest assured, the phenomenon was not the precursor of another grid failure and blackout, it was just the Woodstock Fringe's Festival of Theater and Song going out in a blaze of glory.

The Adirondack-funky theater up on Byrdcliffe has no marquee, so there were not lights to dim when the multi-faceted (multi-credited) troupe presenting the festival events packed their vans and department, but they leave in their wake the electrifying impact of two final productions – Bob Manzari's portrait of a beached whaling captain in Lou Rodger's "Wake of the Essex" (not to mention Manzari's garrulous incarnation of a hound-loving, broke-hearted good ol' boy in Rodger's "Hair of the Dog") and a staged reading of a new play by Charles Traeger, "Ordinary Occurrences." Wallace Norman, the festival's producing Artistic Director, shaped the reading of this most extraordinary contribution to contemporary American Theater, illuminated by a collective of actors, mainly from the Yale School of Drama.

WEIGHTY are the credits of the incredible hulk of an actor, Manzari, who flashes his Music Man's con charm in Rodger's shaggy tale of bad and good dogs gone. We hear of his brother Roy's sheep-killin' herders and his ferocious traffic stoppin' great Dane, Baskerville, in what carries like a bestial Arlo Guthrie "Alice's Restaurant" saga with accompanying guitar by Jon Rogers until that moment Manzari's man leaves us frozen like a deer in headlights by the discovery of his own shock and grief at the loss of the road-killed dog that is this man's best friend. Ah like to cried, but the moment sneaks up so fast, it's more like a punch to the gut than a think evoking sentiment. It just floors you, whomp!

Jon Rodgers, who gigs and records with the Composer's Chamber Theater, played a set while Manazri aged himself about 50 years and came out the shattered hull of Captain John Pollard to relate the tale of his whale-wrecked ship, the Essex, and the ensuing hell he and his mates and crew entered as they sought shore and clung to survival.

In exile from the community of whales on Nantucket who judge him guilty of failing his men and worse, Pollard relives the harrowing ordeal without self-exoneration to a witness named Herman Melville whom he forbids to take notes. Melville takes license instead, penning his epic "Moby Dick" from the Essex captain's saga.

We'll re-read this great American novel, first foisted on us in an existential literature class, but the horror and the pity and the courage of Manzari's Captain Pollard will overshadow Melville's metaphysical Ahab. This monologue, passing timeless in an hour's duration, carries as epic Greek tragedy.

MOVING ON to Traeger's "Ordinary Occurrences," a full-length two-act play described as an "extraordinary contribution to contemporary American theater" and containing the "apple monologue" every young actor in the coming decade is going to use for auditions.

We were engaged, elevated and delighted by this double-layered drama, woven in common, frequently comedic carnal tensions, rising to beatific epiphany and playing out in a fantastic-absurd, totally conceivable and mot gratifying suspension.

Saints are different than you and me because the achieve the omni-sensuality of selfless compassion. Myriad are the ways they arrive at this state. Androgyny is a start. The categories "gay" and "straight," declared out of defensiveness and fear like campanista nationalism limit spirit development. Take Parse (actor Rob Neil gives this shambling guileless innocent an agape grace), the adult orphan white boy photographer who rooms duratively with Joshua, an African American whose hard-working, working-class family took Parse in as an adolescent.

Josh (Leroy Grant) is on the rise in Manhattan as assistant to some major judge and is so straight that he rarely even makes love to his girlfriend, Fran. Tiahuana Ricks plays this schoolteacher with aspirations to the dance as a no-nonsense check

possessed or irrepressible exuberance. She turns into a tap-dancing angel in her time. . .

ART OF the reason Frannie and Josh never get to play is because Parse, coming in as a temporary roommate years ago, is always in the apartment. They lady suspects here beloved may prefer his roomie to her. (Did we mention the opening scene has Josh wigging out in a police station, crying murder when there is neither corpse nor perp in sight? The body of Traeger's play is a flashback leading up to this just-desserts moment I the life of a good but rational and righteous man.).

On the particular day of Traeger's play, Parse is in residence and especially slow opening the door. He has it chain-locked and is obviously up to something. Josh notices a jumble of old clothes in the bathroom and demands explanation, so Parse, with immense relief, confesses.

You guessed it, he's a cross dresser. But it's not his gender he switches, it is his caste.

THIS sensitive, shiftless seeker, sublimating restless heart's hunger in a Halloween confection pig-out, watches a luminous candy apply fall to the gutter and sees it pounced on by a street crone. As she bends over it, absorbed in removing debris, a truck rounds the corner and Parse leaps out to save her. Crying gratitude, she thrusts her wallet at him. Parse, who has no intention of being a hero, flees the scene, later discovering religious cards and $700 in bills.

It becomes his life obsession to find the woman and return this street person's fortune to her. For endless months, he haunts the city's churches, shelters, alleys, making himself inconspicuous with worn clothing as he searches. He finds himself losing himself in the process and likes the person he has become, a man he refers to as Art Holmes (as in Sherlock) way better than the person he was. Neil's Parse relates this tale of human transfiguration in a mix of earnestness and whimsy that explains the clothes to Josh but doesn't otherwise alter his heart and mind.

NEWS comes that Josh's dad is up for a critical operation, and the odd couple travels down to North Carolina for an occasion that becomes a funeral. But not before Parse is visited by a mentor-lover from pre-Holmes days, the insidious Michael Lowrie. (Lucas Holland is way smooth and sweet as this manipulator). He persuades Parse to go for one more porn shoot – "You're such an artist with bodies" – which he reluctantly does, partly to get money for the trip home, but mostly because he is to gentle a soul to deny anyone anything.

The men return to Manhattan separately for the chaos of cosmopolitan yuletide with all its celebrations and disappointments. Parse, in a state of grief for family losses past and present, physically exhausted, erotically confused by a brief passionate encounter with Frannie and just a little drunk, meets the unsolicited arrival of Michael, the insistent Satan from his pre-Art existence, in a state of total, mindless lucidity and dispatches him.

THIS IS NOT an act of gay panic. It carries as the dispensation of justice by the hand of an innocent – think Robert Altman's judicious avenger Brewster McCloud. Parse wraps Michael's body in Christmas wrappings, and death on this holiday turns into a farce – there is this old Louis Vuitton steamer trunk belonging to Parse's uncle that Frannie's been dying to tap on, etc. The play concludes with a wonderful *dues ex machine* device borrowed from *commedia dell'arte* or maybe "Angels in America.

If anybody anywhere has written about the path to sainthood and the subsequent perils of acting from beatific enlightenment with greater succinctness and encased in greater natural and ludicrous disguise, let us know.

MEANTIME, somebody give this play a full run, preferably using the same cast and director.