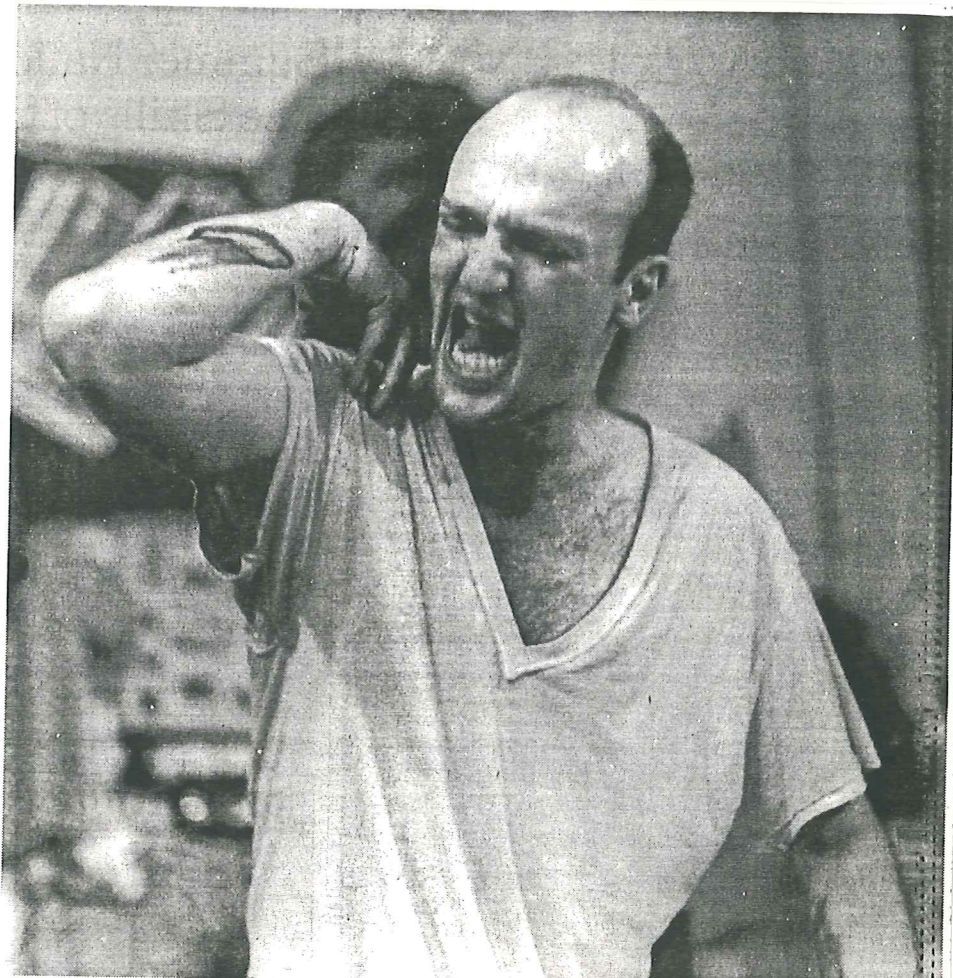


Late Edition

New York: Today, sunny. High 87, cooler at the coast. Tonight, clear. Low 72. Tomorrow, hazy sunshine, more humid. High 90. Yesterday, high 83, low 64. Details are on page C9.



Dona Ann McManus

Matthew Maher interacts with the audience during W. David Hancock's "Race of the Ark Tattoo" at P.S. 122.

THEATER REVIEW

A Grab Bag of Painful Memories

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

If, at the end of "The Race of the Ark, Tattoo," you feel you have to pick tatters of your own identity off the floor so you can try to stitch it back together some day, you have understood this profoundly threatening and vastly entertaining episode in W. David Hancock's continuing campaign to create theater that puts the audience onstage and the performers inside the viewers' heads.

You walk into a room at P.S. 122 large enough to hold only 25 people. It is a flea market run by one P. Foster (Matthew Maher), who is delighted to haggle over his junk for some time until he asks everyone to grab a chair and begins a tale of his life as a violent youngster in foster homes. The best of them was the domain of Homer Phinney, a sly Cape Cod type who ran a flea market in his garage, numbered every item on sale, made up wild stories about each one and collected them in a ratty old file, each with a number corresponding to an item.

As he talks about Phinney, Foster, in voice, gesture and even in his glance, is transformed into Phinney,

THE RACE OF THE ARK TATTOO

By W. David Hancock; directed by Melanie Joseph; additional design/production stage manager, Theresa Gonzalez. Presented by the Foundry Theater and Performance Space 122. At 150 First Avenue, at Ninth Street, East Village.

WITH: Matthew Maher.

who in turn is transformed at times into one of Phinney's friends, his wife, Foster's friends or other foster children. He fills an "ark" (actually a big toy Winnebago camper) with flea market items from which viewers at random, with eyes closed, draw out one, triggering a wild story. Thus Foster's life and world unfold by chance, and Foster has such an uncertain grip on his own personality that the randomness of the evening generates real apprehension that he may disintegrate before his hour is out.

Also, no matter how funny some of the stories may be, each has an undercurrent of menace and irredeemable loss. Foster's father abandoned him at a drunken party. He and his fellow "fosters" at Phinney's place

exhaust themselves and their imaginations searching for a band of Vikings lost on the Cape for a thousand years. (They give the play its name, but it would be unfair to say how.)

Foster's girlfriend, Jilly, with whom he learned sex and wonder and his only burst of affection — "When I was with Jilly, it was like I was waking up from life" — is in an asylum. For him the past is not full of life, and memory is no healer. You want to plead with him to stop the lottery and the stories.

Mr. Hancock has an unerring ear and a huge vocabulary; characters spring to life not in sentences but in phrases. Melanie Joseph, the director, has shaped this performance into a constantly deepening challenge to the audience's sense of reality.

As for Mr. Maher, he is so engaging and so scary that the night I went two groups of people leaving ahead of me got into serious arguments about whether this could possibly be an act. It is: one terrific concoction that calls up searing fear and pity. Whether there is a catharsis depends, I suppose, on your strength; there is no chance after the first few minutes that disbelief will insulate you from the effects of this one.