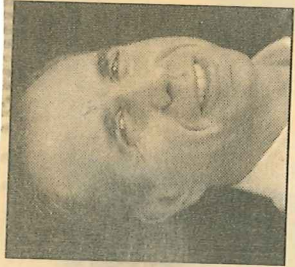


JAN STUART

ON THEATER

What I Mean Is, Don't Close 'Da Mouth



AN OPEN letter to George C. Wolfe, artistic director of the New York Shakespeare Festival, or anyone else looking in who happens to have a prominent

nonprofit theater, an advertising budget and a totally cool membership base.

Dear Mr. Wolfe,

I am not in the habit of writing open letters in columns, as I find the

practice too often disingenuous and manipulative, exploiting the name of the addressee to get the readers' attention over some smelly personal agenda. As such, columnists should only be entitled to one open letter per career.

I am blowing my allotment, here and now.

You might call this a 911 call, asking for intercession before a crime is committed. It's a crime that happens too often on the Off-Off-Broadway circuit: An extraordinary piece of theater with no stars creeps into town with nary a dime to help spread the message, earns rave reviews that are buried in some mysterious corner of the arts pages, gets standing ovations from half-filled houses, then closes after a month, never to be heard from again unless it wins an Obie, when thousands of theatergoers scratch their heads with that old missed-the-boat-again feeling.

One such show is closing tonight at the CSC Theater in the East Village. When I caught it for the first time three weeks ago, I experienced a frisson of discovery and wonder that reminded me of what it was like to attend the earliest previews of "for colored girls who have considered suicide when the rainbow is enuf" and "Bring in 'Da Noise, Bring in 'Da Funk," two Public Theater shows that made one feel as if one was bearing witness to the arrival of a new age.

What this show has in common with those is a theatrical vocabulary all its own, a stunningly talented African-American (with one exception) ensemble, a lifetime supply of humanity and one of those marauding titles that makes you want to run for cover. The resemblances stop there. "You Say What I Mean But What You Mean Is Not What I Said" is the name. A cappella vocalizing is the game.

They call themselves Hot Mouth. Two women, three men. Grisha Coleman, composer and conceptualizer, plays a cello and croons a mock love lament. Helga Davis stands on a table and skitters down a scale of notes like a frantic mother in pursuit of misbehaving children. David Thomson, the tall one with the bald head and sinuous legs, comes out with a bass instrument you expect from a fat opera singer. The diminutive Ching Gonzalez boasts a Fu Manchu shock of chin hair and a stirring baritone. Ezra Knight, the house hunk, sports dreadlocks and Elvis-hugging purple velour pants.

What exactly is it they do? They take seats at a table and launch into a five-

way conversation made up entirely of breathy heaves and grunts, scat-style. Over the next 70 minutes, they amplify and transform this percussive mode of vocalese in a variety of styles that embrace jazz, blues, work songs, funk, folk, spirituals, Gregorian chants and God knows what else. The five singers fill the stage space with their bodies as varyingly as they fill the air with music — climbing ladders, mounting tables, stomping their feet in a synchronized line.

The subject on the face of it is racial identity — stereotypes, social paranoia, roots — but the music itself has a pan-ethnic range that seems to embrace everyone in the theater. In one of the evening's more poignant musical effects, the players unwind around the table in a plaintive convergence of vowel sounds: "I-yi-yi-yi-yi, oy-oy-oy-oy, ay-yay-yay . . ." It's a call-and-response game in which one leads and the rest follow; the suggestions of a sharing community or family are unexpectedly powerful. There is a strong impulse beneath this moment, as elsewhere throughout "You Say What I Mean," that for want of a better word I would call maternal: a communal urge to bring together, to nurture and protect, to keep the peace. Whatever it is, it moves us to our bones.

Oh, I suppose these are not exactly uncharted waters. The atavistic harmonies and play talk have a stylistic relative in Meredith Monk, while the tight blending of voices occasionally echoes such a cappella groups as Take Six and The Bobs. Unlike those latter groups, however, Hot Mouth is not about doing virtuosic covers of familiar tunes or goofy imitations of musical instruments. Rather, it seems to be about breaking human communication down to the very roots of vocal sounds, then reconstructing it into an elegant musical language that means exactly what it says. At its most gibberish, there is never any doubt that these people *understand* one another. It's a bonding experience, minus the high-sugar content that would make the touchy-feely phobic bolt for the exit door.

"You Say What I Mean" is as eclectic and ambitious as its producing Foundry Theater, an itinerant group run by one Melanie Joseph, who three years back gave us a remarkable theatrical hoax called "The Conventions of Cartography." Return visits are a luxury for a theater critic, but I have visited the Hot Mouth group twice and I intend to go a third time. I don't trust that this show is going to surface again, and I want to make sure I can play back these luscious sounds — and these people — in my head at the drop of a hat.

"You Say What I Mean" will be history tomorrow. So, bring in 'da Mouth. Please. 'Da sooner 'da better.

Respectfully yours,
Jan Stuart