

June 30, 1998

# Unreel Existence

*The Race of the Ark Tattoo*

By W. David Hancock  
P.S. 122 Gallery  
150 First Avenue  
477-5288

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

**S**ome people hate the word *musical*; I hate the phrase *performance art*. After all, if a work of art's on the equivalent of a stage, and moves through real time, it's inevitably bound by the theatrical dynamic. What can it be but theater? Behind the unwieldy and nebulous concept of performance art lie both snobbery ("this art is too rarefied for the vulgar necessities of theater") and ignorance ("nothing like this has ever been tried in the theater"). To be fair, the first works of performance art, in our era, grew from the enterprise of visual artists, not theater-makers; the latter were busy breaking down the accrued conventionalities that had made theater seem so stuffy and *vioux jeu* to the visual artists. But we're long past that divisive time. Everything has commingled, every convention's been broken down and rebuilt a dozen times. The only surprise left is an event that actually carries the weight of meaning, in whatever form. How do I know "performance art" is theater? Because it's gotten as convention-bound as every other kind.

The most knowing artists in any mode of theater, though, have never worried about convention, except as something to flex themselves against. Their work is theatrical in that it comes from them and goes to the audience, with nothing in between but the ability to arouse the spectator's interest. They're exemplars of my personal short course in performance art: Have something to say; find the best way of saying it; say it. Does that sound simple-minded? What you have to say—a concept with no bounds at all—can make it incredibly complex, even convoluted.

For a sample, pick the right time of the evening to browse at the flea market currently being held in the tiny gallery space on the 9th Street side of P.S. 122. You won't have to buy anything, but you will find yourself listening to the assembled reminiscences and anecdotes of the guy who keeps the flea market, for whom every object is a door into both his past and the world's. Like most people who run such operations, Mr. Phineas Foster—foster child of the market's former proprietor, Mr. Homer Phinney—is more than a little weird. He has memory lapses and blackouts (brought on, he tells us, by drug treatment in his violent childhood as an orphan)—and has them so convincingly that you may feel a little let down when, on your way out, you're handed a program that tells you he's only the actor Matthew Maher.

While he's Foster, or Foster's foster father (a role he periodically lapses into), Maher is genuinely both pitiable and scary, a child who's lost his past and might, in his desperation to recover it, do something truly dangerous. He totes around what he calls his "story ark," an open-top giant-toy-size van filled with a clutter of the meaningless objects that always turn up at flea markets. The play (yes, it's a play) unfolds according to the order in which audience members



Matthew Maher in *The Race of the Ark Tattoo*: a heritage of junk guaranteed to jar you

choose objects from the "ark" for him to expatiate on. Arks (including Noah's) are a recurring image, as are tattoos, gold teeth, mutilations, and the Community of Faith, which was either a sinister '60s commune in the Hyannis area or a Bavarian monastery that brewed a remarkably-flavored beer.

Phinney/Foster's anecdotes are sad when they aren't violent; death, loss, and suffering are the prevailing themes. But, as his free-wheeling mix of allusions starts to ingest all of culture, history, and biology, you realize that these are the common themes of human life. Everything disappears except the heritage we pass on; the stupid chunks of car upholstery and beach flotsam in Phinney's ark are Proustian madeleines, unlocking treasure houses of memory. ("There's a forgotten odor," he says on two occasions, once about a child's gym sock.)

He passes his stories on to us—there's a key to all theater in this notion—because he has no one else. A modern audience is a collection of spiritual orphans, like the flock of foster children diverted and educated by Foster's stories. Phinney/Foster's tales of loss include the disappearance of parents, lovers, and children, as well as vanished races and amputated limbs. "We're both dead, you know," Phinney whispers to us about himself and his foster son/avatar. "He's just too stupid to know it." Letting the dead speak,

one remembers, is another of theater's basic functions. Hancock's winding road leads, quietly and memorably, to that sacred space. Under Melanie Joseph's direction, Maher guides us there with unnerving authenticity.

# THEATER