

## THEATER REVIEW

# A Metaphysical Takeoff In 'Marat/Sade' Style

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

Watching W. David Hancock's elaborate environmental theater piece, "Deviant Craft," is like cutting into what looks like an ordinary chocolate cake and discovering that it has 20 layers, each with a different flavor and consistency. Don't ask what kind of cake it is. Just dig in, chew thoughtfully, and decide for yourself what essence you wish to extract.

The play, performed by the Foundry Theater company in the inner recesses of the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage, mixes "The Tempest," science fiction, "Marat/Sade," and "The Snake Pit" into an intriguing open-ended meditation on art and chicanery, insanity and genius. Among other notions, the play reimagines Prospero's "rough magic" in the more contemporary language of H. G. Wells and "Star Trek." It takes its title from a rowboat that levitates late in the play with several passengers aboard. The craft may or may not be a time machine.

For the production, directed by Melanie Joseph, the company has transformed two rooms within the Anchorage into sections of a fictitious penal colony for women called the Phlogiston Foundation. An institution founded by the fictional Dr. Horace Milkman in 1957 for intellectually precocious women who have committed violent crimes, it preaches a doctrine of enlightened rehabilitation yet includes grotesque tortures like "the think tank," a wooden box in which prisoners who seriously misbehave are locked for days at a time.

As the audience gathers, "inmates" wearing hospital gowns take tickets and chat with the visitors. The pretext for the gathering is the prison's annual production of "The Tempest." Presiding over the evening is the foundation's stern drama therapist, Mr. Snow (James Himelsbach), who describes its history and goals in a grim military voice. The most prominent figures in that history are the prison's deceased founder, Dr. Milkman, and his late daughter, Katherine, a disturbed genius who at the time of her death was developing a device for time travel based on horticulture. The inmates, Mr. Snow tells us, are being treated with an experimental drug that may turn out to be "a universal antibody."

After several delays, the audience

## DEVIANT CRAFT

By W. David Hancock; directed and developed by Melanie Joseph; set and lighting by Teddy Jefferson; costumes by Doey Luethi; music and sound by David Van Tieghem. Presented by the Foundry Theater, Melanie Joseph, artistic director. At the Brooklyn Bridge Anchorage in the base of the bridge, off Fulton Street, in Brooklyn.

WITH: James R. Himelsbach (Mr. Snow), Doris DiFarnesio (Ginny), Venida Evans (Maggie), Lee Nagrin (Dotty), Ching Valdez-Aran (Harris), Pamela Gray (Frankie), Dor Green (Cookie) and Molly Powell (Betty).

is led into a crude, barnlike theater to watch a bizarre uncompleted production of "The Tempest" in which seven inmates and Mr. Snow play all the parts. What unfolds is a convoluted mixture of Shakespeare and digressive psychodrama in which the roles in "The Tempest" are exchanged by the inmates, who regularly interrupt the play to reveal pieces of their own histories.

The most developed character is Dotty (Lee Nagrin), an animated white-haired woman who plays Miranda and speaks as though in a trance. Exactly 25 years ago, we learn, Dotty accidentally burned down a wing of the institution, killing 30 inmates. At one point in the play, she and a fellow prisoner are forced by Mr. Snow to act out a Gestalt-style therapy ritual in which Dotty confronts a friend who died in the fire.

Other inmates include Cookie (Dor Green), a sassy, combative woman who becomes hysterical and is locked in the think tank, and the hapless Ginny (Doris DiFarnesio), who plays Ariel with a propeller attached to her back. When Ginny begs Mr. Snow to tell her when she will be released, she is devastated to be told her sentence ends in 2054. Then there is Harris (Ching Valdez-Aran), the company's Caliban, a mute woman who discovers speech the moment she finishes a model of a complex molecule that she has been developing for 20 years.

If the play sounds ridiculously complex, that's one of its points. On top of a layered dramatic structure that compares the history of the Phlogiston Foundation with "The Tempest" (Dr. Milkman and Katherine suggest Prospero and Miranda as a late-20th-century Dr. Frankenstein and his daughter), "Deviant Craft" is larded with bogus medical, mathematical, linguistic and scientific jargon. It is so overloaded with pseudo-intellectual baggage that as it goes along it feels more and more like a



Tom Brazil

From left, James R. Himelsbach, Doris DiFarnesio and Lee Nagrin as three of the multiple characters they play in "Deviant Craft."

grand practical joke.

A similar deadpan humor ran through "The Convention of Cartography," Mr. Hancock's 1994 theater piece, which was shown last summer to groups of 20 at a small makeshift "museum" in Chelsea. In that piece, the playwright, portraying a character named Bill, shared his memories and showed home movies of his surrogate father, an itinerant artist named Mike who left Joseph Cornell-like boxes of collected detritus in sites around America. After the lecture, the audience was led into a back room to view a collection of boxes that the curator had scoured the country to retrieve. Only after the show was over was it revealed that Bill, Mike and the entire museum were an invention of the playwright.

"Deviant Craft," although much

larger in its design, plays the same kind of games with the audience. Teasingly enigmatic, deliberately cluttered and filled with "relics" (in this case props that have magical properties), "Deviant Craft" invites endless interpretation. It is a theatrical maze that has an entrance but no exit.

Where Shakespeare's "Tempest," compares Prospero's magic with the illusionary nature of theater, "Deviant Craft" presents a similar dialogue but with a cynical twist that David Mamet, whose name is invoked early in the evening, would probably appreciate. Mr. Hancock suggests that art and what we call reality are not just an illusion, but a diabolical if enthralling metaphysical hoax.