



SOME HISTORIC/SOME HYSTERIC

New Stage Theatre Company at Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center

Art can indeed transcend brutal reality, transmuting the horrors of history into pure gold. *Some Historic/Some Hysteria* is a case in point. This multimedia performance piece, which deals with the women patients of a 19th-century mental hospital, is dazzling, brilliant, and searing.

Director Ildiko Lujza Nemeth, who conceived the piece with Jessica Sofia Mitrani, based it on the work and notes of Dr. Jean-Martin Charcot. Charcot, the founder of modern neurology, treated women for hysteria (the catchall phrase for women's mental illnesses at that time). As director of the Salpêtrière Hospital in Paris, he staged theatrical demonstrations using his patients as performers.

Charcot is seen here as more villain than hero, putting his hysterics through their paces to the titillation of large audiences. Ostensibly a method of scientific inquiry, these stagings were in fact circuses, and the viewers (many of them famous and aristocratic) were not unlike villagers attending a hanging or Romans watching Christians fed to the lions.

The production—all in black, white, and red—features a narrator (a stunning woman in red) and a flawless ensemble of dancer-actors backed by a slide show with talking photographs. There is not a false note anywhere. As Charcot (portrayed with chilling authenticity by Markus Hirnigel) lectures to the audience, he explains each type of hysteric as defined by her symptoms. Sexuality, repressed and otherwise, is the cornerstone of this supposed illness. And Charcot himself, it is gradually revealed, is not above exploiting his patients sexually. Nor is he above exploiting his audience. We are drawn willy-nilly into the action, becoming voyeurs at the Salpêtrière Hospital.

This view of the birth pangs of modern neurology is devastating, but it is also an awesome aesthetic experience. There is magnificent work all around: set design, costumes, movement, music, performance, and direction.

*Presented by New Stage Theatre Company
at Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center, 107 Suffolk St., NYC.*

*Nov. 10–Dec. 10. Tue.–Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5 p.m. (No performance Tue., Nov. 28. Closing performance Sun., Dec. 10, 3 p.m.)
(212) 868-4444 or www.smarttix.com.*

Reviewed by Irene Backalenick

Published on BackStage.com on November 13, 2006.

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