

REVIEW

ARCHIPELAGO OF DELIGHT

-- Review by Andrew Periale

Archipelago of Delight is a new work by Miguel Romero, Harley Erdman, and Christopher Haynes, faculty members at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst (Romero and Erdman) and Springfield College (Haynes). The play is full of delights, too: a serious exploration of the nature of desire which nonetheless never loses its light touch; puppets of superb design and craftsmanship; impressive student performances.

Archipelago of Delight is the story of a young woman on the verge of "becoming." She is exploring for the first time the appetites she feels - greed, gluttony, lust - as a way of determining for herself if these natural impulses are necessarily sinful and, if so, "deadly." The woman (called "The Singer" in the program and played by Jenny Conley) is the only non-puppet in the play. She sings to us the tale of her latent personhood at the show's beginning, end, and several times in the middle. Otherwise, she sits and watches as her puppet Doppelganger goes on a journey to the dark side of human excess. Conley delivers the challenging music (Christopher Haynes' score is a sort of cabaret opera) with a voice that is wonderful - a gift. Her character, though, comes across as an oddly virginal Sally Bowles; the painful lessons that life teaches her are undercut somewhat by her apparent inability to sin with gusto. The puppet protagonist paddles her way from island to sinful island on an ocean of moonbeams. She encounters a handful of bizarre characters (who seem to be moving from island to island with her), and learns about the frailty of character and the apparent inevitability of sin. As dispiriting as this conclusion might seem to the pious, one has only to look around to find its resonance with the human experience. Harley Erdman's lyrics are clever and well-crafted.

The puppets themselves were fabulous. After an intensive residency this past January with Sebastian Roser, it should be no surprise that the paperfold sculpting technique of his famous father provided the primary unifying design element. The secondary characters were a quartet of zany oddballs well-suited to an archipelago (The Tempest meets Gilligan's Island). The puppe-

teers scooted around on wheeled stools in a modified kuruma ningyo style. There was also a large rod-puppet serpent/temptor to accompany the heroine, and numerous smaller creatures. Romero's staging was imaginative, and his design of space exquisite. Having worked for years as a scenic designer in New York, Romero has taken to the very visual art form of puppetry like a worm to compost. In the relatively brief time since he discovered puppetry, Romero has positively immersed himself in it - attending seminars, festivals, conferences and workshops both here and abroad. *Archipelago of Delight* represents, I think, a kind of "masterwork" with which Romero joins the ranks of puppet theatre artists whose work needs to be seen.

The nine black-clad puppeteers did not once betray their inexperience as manipulators; the performances were expressive and highly nuanced. There were several types of figures, and most were handled directly by the puppeteers -- no rods or strings. Out of the floor grew a "greed plant" whose stems and tendrils were jewelry bedecked hands and arms. There were moving bits of scenery that transformed the space into prison, pleasure palace, sausage factory. The manipulators worked in silence. All voices (as well as other miscellaneous sounds directly associated with the figures), were provided by the "sound machine" - a collection of voice modulators and percussion instruments that allowed three actors to create a fabulous soundscape for the bizarre collection of characters on stage. The "sound machinists" were as compelling to watch as the puppets, and I found myself shifting my gaze from one to the other throughout the show. Their invented language was very funny, and the synching of voice to movement was impeccable.

New works in the field of puppetry don't usually become part of the general repertory-- just think of Eric Bass' *Sand* or Ronnie Burkett's *Street of Blood* performed by someone else. The creator's psyche, personality or world view is too inextricably entwined with the text to imagine such a thing. A piece like *Archipelago of Delight* might well be a vehicle for other artists, though. It is clearly well-suited to the arena of educational theatre, where process should be (though often isn't) much more important than product. In the process of mounting this production, the three collaborators realized after the show opened that the ending simply didn't work -- it was too upbeat. They junked the closing number and wrote a new one. Though I understand this caused a few gasps among the cast, it was absolutely the right thing to do. I would hope that other university theatre programs might paddle their way to the Archipelago. The music and lyrics are available, and, when it comes to sin, there are always new islands to explore.