THEATER

Stallionist Visionism

By Michael Feingold

THE EXTRAVAGANT TRIUMPH OF JESUS CHRIST, KARL MARX, AND WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE. A play by Fernando Arrabal, translated by Miguel Falquez-Certain, directed by Eduardo Manet, presented by INTAR, 420 West 42nd Street, 695-6134.

THE BROTHERS. A play by Kathleen Collins, directed by Billie Allen, presented by the Women's Project at the American Place Theater, 111 West 46th Street, 247-0393.

"Artists should only engage in politics," said Chekhov, "insofar as is necessary to defend themselves from politics," and the marvelous contortions of this statement are summed up in the fact that he made it to *support* Zola's position in the Dreyfus case—courageously, too, since the man on the receiving end was his publisher Suvorin, one of Russia's leading anti-Semites at the time.

There will probably be much political to-do about Arrabal's latest play, the extravagant title of which conveys very little sense of its contents. It is no less than a satirical attack on Castro and on the prospects for Communist revolutions in Latin America generally. Like most satires, it is not always a very fair or scrupulous attack. And what a time to pick, when the death squads of the right are raging across the tropics! Yet the thing was inevitable, is not unjustifiable, makes perfect sense, and will probably do more good than harm, especially in the theater, where its contagious playfulness counts for a good deal more than its doctrinal stance.

Arrabal has had his say often enough about right-wing dictatorships (*Guernica*, *Ceremony for a Murdered Black*, *They Put Handcuffs on Flowers*), and it seems logical that he should now want to express himself, always from a theoretical and poetic standpoint, on dictatorships of the left. His story is motivated by a series of premises that sound like Cuban exiles' jokes about Castro: that he is paranoid; that he is a secret homosexual who makes his orderly dress as a woman; that he has turned Cuba into "a Russian resort town"; that he has a double hidden away for public appearances; that he was expelled from a Jesuit seminary for making an adolescent sexual joke about the Holy Ghost and ever since has nurtured a guilty longing for the Church; that he is a coward and a mama's boy, etc., etc. It does not particularly matter if these assertions are true about Castro: El Caballo (Stallion), as the play's dictator is called, may not even be intended to represent Castro, though he is certainly made up that way in the current production, and no other Latin American state fits Arrabal's whole bill of particulars. What matters is that they have all been true, separately, of one dictator or another, and that together they have a particular application to Latin countries where there is a complex interaction between communism and the Church. (Not necessarily even Latin countries: Stalin was supposed to have felt guilty about being expelled from an Orthodox seminary. Maybe what we have here is a trickled-down version of James Agee's famous pun about "Joseph Stallion.")

SHARON PRYOR-CARTER

Castro's recline and fall, as Arrabal sees it

What interests Arrabal in the material, first, is the interconnection of sex and power—a familiar subject, but one that he's able to shed newly nuanced light on through his freewheeling dramatic imagination and the relative sophistication of his viewpoint. The whole struggle to rule, the fight to make a revolution, dominate it, and finally betray it, appears to him as a game that humans continually play on one another—inevitable, pathetic, and finally laughable. The relative aloofnes of this view is kept from being unpleasant by the charm with which Arrabal accepts the inevitability, even introducing a friendly anarchist clown from the future to make a joke of his own position. Though many writers have followed or aped Genet, who gave these ideas their solidest stage form, he strikes me as the only one who has actually extended Genet's premises into comedy.

On a lighter level, what appeals to him is the temperamental contrast between the puritanism of the European political tradition and the easygoing folkways of the warmer Latin climates. El Caballo rages at himself for "ruling a tinfoil country with an iron grip," and large amounts of the play's fun stem from this discrepancy, climaxing in its boldest satirical stroke, showing where the author's heart really lies, when he pinpoints the cause of communism in Latin America—the CIA! Here, even radicals with a vested interest in revolution must bow to the perceptions of a superior wit. And if the play offers cold comfort to the people, in El Salvador and all over Latin America, who are being oppressed and menaced by the right wing, forewarned is forearmed, as the saying goes, and there is no point in concealing from them that what follows may be every bit as bad or even worse. Maybe Arrabal's 80th century man, with his nonviolent anarchism, isn't such a clown after all. Eduardo Manet's production, sometimes a shade too broad, is strongly cast and pointedly played, with the utmost seriousness leavened by just the right amount of foolery. Betty La Roe and Thomas Kopache are especially good, and Ron Faber, who has gone through a string of good, bad, and indifferent performances since he last triumphed in an Arrabal play, is absolutely first-rate in the multiple role of the dictator, his double, and, for a few demented moments, a lesbian transvestite disguised as him.

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Our theater tends to give serious black actors the same crummy set of alternatives our society gives black people in general: either ghettoization in some sincere but not very good play about black life, or virtual invisibility. My own solution to this—a large classical repertory company with color-blind casting—is apparently not on the national agenda at the moment. Meantime, one sits patiently, hoping for better black plays, and marveling, over and over, at the enormous number of gifted black actors and actresses we have.

The sole virtue of Kathleen Collins's *The Brothers* is that it deals with the gilded and not the garbage-strewn side of the ghetto, which makes for a nice change; every other good quality it has in performance is supplied by five spectacular actresses, playing the put-upon wives of the unseen title characters. If you happen to be casting a classical rep, or if you just like watching fine actors at work, this is a banquet. The wonderful Trazana Beverley is a shade self-conscious here, and Josephine Premice's cabaret elegance slightly out of key with the naturalistic context, but these are minor complaints. Otherwise, director Billie Allen has marshaled her cast handsomely: the warmth and sensuality of Janet League; the spitfire dazzle of Seret Scott, mixing magically with her eerie, childlike quality; Marie Thomas's unexpectedly Chekhovian flair for comic pathos—let me put it this way: for any three of these five, I would even sit through *Agnes of God* again. As for Kathleen Collins, she was intelligent enough to think out the tricky structure of this play, and no doubt will write a better one in time. Meanwhile, here be actresses. ■

Cloisterphobia

By Roderick Mason Faber

CATHOLIC SCHOOL GIRLS. A play by Casey Kurtti, directed by Burry Fredrik, presented at the Douglas Fairbanks Theatre, 432 West 42nd Street, 239-4321.

My upbringing as an inordinately rational Unitarian, where high rituals of faith were anathema and Jesus was considered merely a resplendently good man

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By Robert Massa

The title of Michael Kirby's new Structuralist Workshop production, **PRISONERS OF THE INVISIBLE KINGDOM,** must refer to the audience. Kirby's *Kingdom* is composed of alternating scenes from four separate but parallel sci-fi adventures. Only one of the four follows the logic of linear narrative, so that, for example, the play begins with the fourth scene of the first story. Figuring out which story each scene belongs to, and where in that story the scene belongs, is supposed to keep us amused for an intermissionless two hours. From this "exercise in mysification" we are meant to experience how "to make the mind work in unusual ways."

Kirby's aesthetic might be fun, if its execution weren't so limp. The differences among the stories are bland, and the dialogue often seems intended just to bridge the gap between sound effects. Scenes are directed toward one or two of the four sides of the audience—to help map out the plot—so we watch most of the play through black scrims. The actors, when visible, are comic-book campy, which may fit the concept but grows tiresome right away. More tiresome still is the music, an appropriately empty-headed heavy-metal score. (La Mama, 475-7710)

Elinor Jones's **WHAT WOULD JEANNE MOREAU DO?** is yet another portrait of the troubles of Manhattan's swinging singles, but her characters have enough self-critical humor to make the subject somewhat fresh. I wish this script were more ambitious, though. Each of the two acts is basically a monologue, and the two leads never meet onstage. These are tough economic times, but that's no reason to cramp the action this way. Stuart White's production helps, with its clean pacing, and strong performances by Burke Pearson and Lynn Milgrim. (WPA, 691-2274)

The Pan Asian Rep is currently presenting a trilogy about Japanese Americans detained in internment camps during World War Two. **BEHIND ENEMY LINES,** the current offering, is dismally trivial. The dialogue is flat, transitions between scenes are clumsy, and character motivations are never clear. The actors even have trouble with the blocking. How did this play ever get through rehearsals?

Kozo ("urchin" in Japanese) is a new theater company that promises to "examine international classic plays and bring them our unique American perspective." That perspective currently gives us a jazzed up version of Brecht's **BAAL,** reset in this country during the swing era. James A. Simpson achieves some dazzling effects on what must be a shoestring budget, but they tend to muffle the play: Baal's rush to destruction can't achieve much momentum with a wisecracking emcee who disrupts the cinematic leaps between the scenes. The cast is uneven, but Zach Grenier is fascinating in the title role. There's also a live jazz band and free beer to help smudge the edge between Text and Event. (260-8603)

Scott Wittman and Marc Shaiman's **LIVIN' DOLLS,** a new musical about six teenagers at the Wakiki Hilton in search of true love and a sun tan, was "inspired" by the beach blanket movies of the '60s. It is full of rarefied Americana ("pineapple pizza," "surfabeds"), and has a bright cast, a breezy score, and an amusing Barbie beach-house set by John Lee Beatty. But the writing is so spotty that *Dolls* seems intended more as homage than parody, and ends up being yet another well-staged but mindlessly cute musical revue. Just what we need: *Pump Boys and Dinettes Go Hawaiian.* (Manhattan Theater Club, 472-0600) ■