

The Sensibility of Silliness

by Mark Hall Amitin

If you happen to be in the city for a day hither and yon over the summer months and want evening's entertainment, there are a few goings on that will keep you amused. There's something to be said for the sensibility of silliness, especially in the good old summertime when it's best to eat light, drink light and keep your theatre frothy. Here are four hot shows that will help you cool your heels: *MAMBO MOUTH*, *THE SONG OF SINGAPORE*, *PAGEANT*, and *RED SCARE ON SUNSET*.

MAMBO MOUTH is a marvel of six clever characters created and performed by the solo genius John Leguizamo. Up there in the league with Eric Bogosian, Spalding Gray and Reno, Leguizamo deftly swings from one bizarre personality to another with a mystifying agility and comic appeal, ranging from a slimy Latino cable T.V. call-in host in Miami, "God's waiting room," greatly taken with his own sex appeal, to a street hooker with a heart broken too many times and a true sense of revenge ("I crazy glued his dick to his leg"); a teenager who has just had his first sexual experience with an enormously fat prostitute (even that, he claims, is better than "buffing the helmet"), a small time street hustler who's been busted with a sense of self-overblown like the Michelin tire man, and the final pièce de résistance, a successful Japanese business man who was once poor Latin street trash who has been transmogified ("I used to hold my crotch for self-assurance, now I zen out"). In each of these fully developed and totally believable personalities this deft writer/actor weaves both hilarity and compassion through a prism of truth and suffering as well as outlandish exaggeration of identity. They are each archetypes and yet all individuals. The quick changes are smartly handled and aided considerably by a clever visual device I'll not give away. He puts Meryl Streep to shame with his ability to mimic the dialects of the Irish, Israelis, Swedes and the Japanese. Leguizamo is also presently co-starring in the film *Hangin' With The Homeboys*, which is in movie theatres throughout the area. *Mambo Mouth* is directed by Peter Askin and is running the Orpheum at 126 Second Avenue (at St. Mark's Place), (212) 477-2477 for information and tickets.

THE SONG OF SINGAPORE. From the moment you enter the lobby you know you're no longer in a real world, or at least not in New York in 1991. You can't be certain that you're not in some garish Chinese restaurant until you enter the ballroom of what was once the Polish Army Veteran's Hall and is now made over into a 1941 Singapore waterfront nightclub. The great put on carries over even into the ladies' room (I didn't look, I took their word for it). As you enter you are greeted by a suave and charming maitre d' in tuxedo and hostess in a Chinese gown slit up the side. Before you is a room done up in VERY Chinese red (red table cloths, red lanterns), the band plays and the audience is seated at tables (before the show and during intermission you can get up and dance) the waitpersons are busy serving drinks such as the "Shirley Temple of Doom" or the "Taiwonon" and, like any good old fashioned nightclub of the era, a photo girl (dressed like a member of the press) wanders the hall. The ceiling fans twirl (not to worry, they have real air conditioning; not so foolish as to create the torrid humidity of a real Singapore night).

The evening starts with the leading of the faux-blind piano-player-cum-owner of Freddy's Singapore Club to his upright where the stolen jewels are later secreted, (oh, I shouldn't give away the plot, thin as it may be), the Chinese cymbals crash, the lights go down and the upbeat swing tunes

"Inexpensive Tango" (a neo-Weill tune replete with accordion) and "Rose of Rangoon" not to mention "Necrology" and "Never Pay Musicians What They're Worth," keep the joint jumpin'. The show is kept at its nadir by its nadir by the antics, charm, wit, stellar pipes and fabulous figure of the delightful dynamite Donna Murphy who could stop a rickshaw at high noon in any town. She sings many of the best numbers with a voice that ranges from honey-dripped to brassy and a style that goes from ditzzy floozy to walking from an amnesia to discover her true identity as... (naw, I ain't gonna give it away) and she plays a real mean kazoo as well as belts out a great torch song. She's ably assisted by Francis Kane who turns up every five minutes in another role, each one delightfully broad and vaudevillian, from villain to stooge. Also to be praised is Cathy Foy, who plays the Dragon Lady, and Chai Li who is surprisingly funny with the straightest deadpan I've ever seen and a voice bordering on the operatic. Watch out *MISS SAIGON*. The evening has its share of bad jokes ("You lost your passport?...No, I lost my past, sport.", "SOS you SOB's" or "You mean the fish I cooked was a red herring?") but even they are redeemed by the stellar solo turns of the musicians. There's even a conga line through the audience with the cast AND the wait staff. It's not just performance, it's an evening out. Directed lovingly by A.J. Antoon (Tony Award Winner) and brilliantly designed by John Lee Beatty ("Penn and Teller", "Burn This", "Lectice and Lovage") at *The Song of the Singapore Theatre*, 17 Irving Place at 15th Street. (212) 228-0844 for tickets. The theatre opens an hour early for drinks and dancing.

PAGEANT ain't just another beauty contest; these six girls "have something extra". It's no secret that Miss Great Plains, Miss Deep South, Miss Bible Belt, Miss Industrial Northeast, Miss West Coast and Miss Texas have one thing in common, (common?) come on... They're men! *Pageant* also has an over the hill host (J.T. Cromwell) in the Burt Parks mode and judges from the audience that gets to vote on the winners. It's not just a one-joke gag, though these 'gals' have some slam bam talent (and great muscles). They sing, they dance, they are spokesgirls for Glamouresse beauty products and they are tested on the emergency beauty crisis hotline, not to mention the bathing suit competition. The evening is excessively pink but the only pains you will suffer are from laughing till your face hurts. Madonna and Liza have both been seen in the audience, and I understand from Miss Deep South (David Drake) that Madonna picked her the winner that evening. Miss Bible Belt (Randi Ash) came in first my night at the contest. I agree she deserved it as her singing and bell ringing (I'm banking on Jesus, my co-signer) was a step above Miss Deep South's ventriloquism (even if she did look better in the bathing suit competition). They sing to a strong musical backup, "America, you made us what we are today," they tap, roller skate, play the accordion ("Roll out the Barrel"), deliver homilies and environmental messages and do high kicks. Miss Great Plains is "never so happy as when she's breeding live stock," Miss West Coast is "an EST graduate...in the future she intends on living in the past," and last year's Miss Glamouresse hastens to remind us that "true beauty is found beneath your dress." This is not just a travesty, but a great put-on. Wittily "conceived," directed and choreographed by Robert Longbottom (no double entendre intended). At the *Blue Angel*, 323 West 44th Street. Tickets: (212) 262-3333.

RED SCARE ON SUNSET is the fifth of Charles Busch's gender-bending spoofs hit-and-be-hit over the last seven years beginning with his *Vampire Lesbians of Sodom*,

followed by *Psycho Beach Party*, and last season's *The Lady in Question*, where a film star battled the Nazi's. This time around, Hollywood's Red Scare is the target of Mssr. Busch's tomfoolery. It is surely 1950's genre mimicking the best and worst of filmland (and Washington's) overwhelming grip of fear over the infiltration of the Communist plague and the subsequent rooting out by the insidious HUAC hearings. But little seriousness here. No preaching or bleeding hearts, only laughs and style with a Patsy Kelly style right wing best-friend-side-kick, (played with impeccable punch by Julie Halston and ably assisted by her Hedda Hopper hats) who has a checkered past, a "Norman Maine" husband (the ever placid Arnie Kolodner) who is not exactly who we think he is and the Yetta Veld school of method acting on Sunset Boulevard. The sets (Brian T. Whitehill) and costumes (Debra Tennenbaum) are 50's inspired poofery that have a wit all their own. As for the delightfully off-kilter Mr. Busch's Mary Dale, he can pack one mean dream sequence, and is the queen of grimace, not to mention the perfect modulator of tremolo and furbelow. In a typical 'all's well that ends well', the politics may be muddled but the laughs aren't. Directed by Busch's long time fellow-traveler (double entendre intended) Kenneth Ellior. At the delightful Lucille Lortel Theatre, 112 Christopher Street. Tickets: (212) 924-8782.

What these four entertainments all have in common, besides their laughs and first-class talents, is a measure of the the stereotypical that we can all identify with and chortle over from our collective pasts and presents, as well as some of those cultural icons and shibboleths that need a deserved poking every so often. So go and have a good time. It's summertime. ◀

John Leguizamo is featured in scenes from *Mambo Mouth*.

