

# Chanting 'the storm is here'

by Arthur Sainer

A Bread & Puppet procession through downtown Providence, beginning at the Rhode Island School of Design, opened the Rhode Island Festival Theatre '71, on Sunday, March 28, and by the time I arrived on

Wednesday evening, the Bread & Puppets were into "Domestic Resurrection Circus" which was to conclude with another parade, a "Noah's Ark" parade which would wind out of Sayles Hall at Brown University and onto the quadrangle, accompanied by the chant, "the storm is here."

A little apocalyptic, that chant, perhaps, for the smallest state in the Union, but I don't think the rhetoric is puffed up. No one any longer denies that the storm is buffeting this land. If we can't "get on the ark," as the enormous Bread & Puppet flag enjoins us to,

the admonition at least reinforces in its own wry way the critical state of things.

Rhode Island and the campuses of the various colleges in Providence played host to a number of theatrical statements. They included the National Black Theatre's "Ritual to Regain Our Strength and Reclaim Our Power," the Burning City Theatre's "Massacre of the American Ghost Dance Indian," the Open Theatre's "Terminal," the Performance Group's "Commune," the Manhattan Project's "Alice in Wonderland," the mime pieces of Michael Grando, and the Little Theatre of the Deaf's "Journeys."

The concentration was heavily on death, atrocities, injustice. Here, for example, is an excerpt from the program notes for "The Massacre of the American Ghost Dance Indian." "In the 1870s and '80s many American Indian tribes took to a new religion. Many years of white treachery, hunger, and disease had left them a frightened and desperate people. A

prophet appeared—'no more misery, sickness, or death, no more fighting. The buffalo will return, prepare by dancing a holy dance. In a trance, the dead loved ones will return.' The religion became known as the Ghost Dance movement and spread rapidly throughout the northern plains. The whites became frightened of the power of this dance which was making Indians alive with new confidence and hope—'we will live again.' At Wounded Knee, South Dakota, soldiers were sent to a Dakota tribal gathering to stop the Indians from dancing. The Indians refused and continued. At close range, volley after volley of rifle and machine gun fire went into their ranks. Over 300 men, women, and children were murdered. The bodies were thrown into an open trench."

The violence of the Manson commune ("Commune"), the violence of U. S. troops against Indians in the last century ("Ghost Dance"), the violence of U. S. troops against Vietnamese peasants in this century ("Grey Lady Cantata" and "Resurrection Circus"), the American refusal to acknowledge death as part of its culture ("Terminal")—a rather concentrated dose of dark Americana for a "festival." Add to that the ironic sound of "Providence" as host.

My ex-Voice colleague, Michael Smith, pointed out that the choice of festival pieces was curious in another way. Not one play in the lot—that is, not one work that had begun from the mind of a playwright and had then been mounted by a theatre company. Was this because the best current works in America were non-plays?

The consideration was voiced during a critics' symposium on Thursday morning that included Michael, myself, Larry Stark of Boston After Dark, and James Roose-Evans of London's Hampstead Theatre Club. My own view was that ensemble troupes, since they were more or less permanent units, made themselves more accessible to touring than production units that existed simply for the life of a play. But it's also true that most, not all, of the best work at present is being done by the experimental troupes which may or may not have play-

wrights in residence, that the majority of plays written in isolation are strangely bloodless, or overblown but disconnected from the essential tensions of the culture, that some of the best are dissipated by their literariness. Not that the best work of the ensembles is necessarily excellent, some of it is second-rate, but by and large there's a vitality that makes contact with the fretfulness, rages, and ambiguities of our time. In a sense these works are like the dreaded new neighbors come to infect the children of the middle-class. "We'll get your children, your affluence will do you no good, your children will be ours."

The driving force at the festival was young Mark Amitan, sunken-eyed, cheerfully brooding countenance, always moving, always skirting or backtracking from the latest potential disaster, driving ahead in the face of monumental blandness, a kind of beautiful, runny-nosed visionary. Mark's Universal Movement Theatre Repertory has taken up where the Radical Theatre Repertory left

off; its object—to sink radical roots into the suddenly quaking crust of America's heartland.



H. Theo Ehrhardt

## GOD

"We've never seen work like this before," a matron said at the critics' symposium. "How are we to prepare to understand it?" By being yourself, by not preparing.

For we come too often with what we believe of ourselves rather than what we believe. And I don't know that too many of us didn't bring our New York-New Left assumptions, instead of simply bringing ourselves. But we did try.

For many of us it was a time to meet old friends—never enough time in New York. Coming and going during the course of those days: Joseph Papp, Richard Schechner, Peter Schumann, and a host of playwrights—Susan Yankowitz, Megan Terry, Israel Horowitz, Michael Smith, Rochelle Owens, myself, and Jean-Claude von Itallie. The playwrights, incidentally, decided to meet as a panel but to separate throughout Bigelow Lounge as if they were booths at a bazaar and each become the focal point for a group that would have a dialogue with it. It didn't look like it would work, for a time no one came to the playwrights but each other. But the shyness started to dissolve just as this writer had to leave, leave the bazaar, the festival, and Providence for the bus back to the old urban veteran NYC.

But left with memories of enormous, stately figures, ordinary sized devils, and chattering Biblical offspring crowding through the massive, encyclopaedic "Domestic Resurrection Circus." Surely the Bread & Puppets' most ambitious work, epic in scale, complex in thought. Gods, Abrahams, soldiers, angels, devils, Vietnamese peasants, jugglers, saints, more devils (hurling metal objects down from the ceiling), violins, flutes, trumpets. And the flag, the enormous blue flag proclaiming "get on the ark." And the vast audience, first hearing, then uttering the chant, as we all moved into the darkness outdoors, into the chilly April night, "the storm is here."



H. Theo Ehrhardt

## PETER SCHUMANN