

VIDEO FRAGMENTS

Robert J. Pierce

In his new video work-in-progress, *More Men*, Charles Atlas presents the ideas of performance, biography and men using two videotapes and two television monitors, and proceeds to fragment time and space in various ways, thus creating or disrupting narrative development and providing the audience with more perceptual input than it can coherently handle, sometimes forcing it to choose between stimuli.

At one point, someone on one of the monitors states: "The question is, how is all this going to be integrated?" I've forgotten the context now, but the question surprised me into realizing that the fragmentation was getting integrated, that it was all making sense, and that the connections were there for us to make.

The work begins with the two monitors presenting an identical monologue by Lon Chaney 3d except that one monitor is exactly one second behind the other. It's impossible to keep from flicking back and forth between the two screens to see what you just saw or to make sense of the overlapping sentences that swell and ebb in waves of incoherence. Atlas synchronizes the two tapes more closely, so the images seem simultaneous, but the words sound as if they've come through an echo chamber. This fragmenting of time occurs elsewhere, but never as formally.

Within a minute or two, one of the monitors cuts to a different angle, providing two views of the same action. This is the piece's first fragmentation of space.

Before long, one of the monitors cuts to an entirely different videotaped sequence of Chaney, thus further disrupting our

usual ideas of time and space continuity. The cut is to Chaney looking pensive and repeating, over and over, "To act well, you need a good mirror." It's easy enough to remain aware of this action while concentrating more on the other monitor where Chaney talks about himself, his father and his grandfather.

But later, images of the original, silent *Phantom of the Opera* appear on one monitor while Chaney 3d acts sequences from the film on the other. The juxtaposition of different times and spaces now spans generations: we get to see progeny and heritage simultaneously. When monitors appear behind Chaney 3d on each of the monitors we're watching, we not only get to see him act in front of his grandfather, but at one point Atlas presents four different sequences of Chaney 3d talking simultaneously. It's mind-boggling. I found I had to totally ignore content and marvel at Atlas' audacity and the formal beauty of what he had done.

The second man in *More Men* is Kenny, a dancer, apparently, who seems self-taught. His dancing is mostly about rhythms and weight — he dances in a manner associated with punk-rock. We never get to know much about him and since Atlas sometimes presents him on one monitor and Chaney on the other, I find him a disruptive interpolation. Certainly he's the least memorable of the four men.

The third man talks about a grandfather who was a pickpocket, and about finding a rabbit at Grand Central. A real — and very affectionate — rabbit appears in the sequence. I spend a lot of time wondering if this third man is psychotic or a good actor, and I never do decide.



Charles Atlas: Choose your stimuli

He goes on to talk about planning a robbery of someone who always watches Johnny Carson and never leaves the set to answer the phone or anything.

When Atlas later cuts to Johnny Carson I realize it's Carson and not the man with the rabbit who is crazy. Everything about the show — juxtaposed against Atlas' natural style — is artificial: the lighting, the set, the ridiculously primed audience and especially Carson's energy level. As Carson interviews a man named Donald Duck, Atlas cuts on one monitor to an old movie of someone robbing a home safe and my first reaction is that the robbery is really taking place — not that Atlas is creating a narrative story here, but that he is somehow showing me reality. I'm still not sure why I was so jolted: perhaps because the old TV movie seemed closer to reality than to Carson's media style.

What I like about the sequence is how Atlas was able to create a narrative by the juxtaposition of otherwise unrelated elements. The collage had become a story.

The last man is presented in a straight-

forward, documentary manner on only one of the monitors — I presume when *More Men* is finished, this last section will be as fragmented as the other sequences. In this final scene, the man reminisces about his childhood and family life. It's an utterly unexciting life: he got drafted, he became a cabdriver or a butcher or something. The point is not that his job is dull, but that he can say nothing about his life that isn't deadeningly humdrum. Near the end of the tape, a record player can be heard in the background emitting the song, "I Did It My Way," and the man presents a vocal dramatization of the words as they're sung (for a moment he tries to sing along, but apparently is incapable of melody or harmony. It's all corny as hell — the worst kitsch imaginable — but you don't laugh because the man means the words, he derives solace from them and justifies his existence to himself with them. And the tragedy is that he says early on that he wanted to be a musician, but he never had — or took — the chance.

And I don't know how this all ultimately gets integrated except that Chaney was so clearly oppressed by his heritage, and consequently insecure, and the dancer was dreadful and the psychotic was just weird and although I remember wondering why Atlas hadn't made three separate tapes and just dropped the dancer, nonetheless, the tape hangs together and it does make sense. On many levels. I suspect it will make more sense as Atlas further manipulates the material — extending the formal concept of fragmentation to the entire tape.

I find it peculiar to realize my grandparents probably would not have liked the idea of fragmentation and may not have even understood it while I — in this particular case — find it much more interesting than traditional forthrightness.