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# THE KITCHEN

VIDEO MUSIC DANCE PERFORMANCE FILM LITERATURE

**T H E A T E R**

**REVIEW**

## The Raging Of the Lambs

**LAMB OF GOD HOTEL.** Written, directed, set and costumes by Karen Finley. Lighting design by Finley and Stephen Rueff. With Amy Elliott, Hapi Phace, Helen Shumaker and Andy Soma. At The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., Manhattan, through May 3. Seen at Wednesday's opening.

By Jan Stuart

STAFF WRITER

**T**HE MOTTO of the Lamb of God Hotel is "It's better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all." All the residents at this art-forsaken flophouse feel grievous abuse — from their childhood, their families, their white-male-dominated society. And they are very determined to abuse anyone in shouting distance with those feelings. That means you.

Welcome to Karen Finley country, where seldom is heard an encouraging word and the victims are women or gay. With her second play, "Lamb of God Hotel," the controversial performance artist shifts the spotlight off herself and onto four actors. Whether or not you've seen Finley in action, however, it's clear that her absence is merely illusory: She's loud and present in every demented, conflicted character on stage.

A woman named Squeeze (Amy Elliot) tells of being raped by her father and rendered sterile by a botched illegal abortion. As a result, she parades around dressed like Miss Mazeppa in a bus-and-truck company of "Gypsy" and rags on straight white men like Beanie (Andy Soma), a hypersensitive whiner who himself was once molested by his brother. Beanie comes to the Lamb of God Hotel after having been tossed out of his house by his wife, ostensibly because of his inability to be intimate with people for whom he has any feelings.

Squeeze shares a close kinship with Chuckles (Hapi Phace), an HIV-positive gay man who intends to commit suicide and makes meticulous arrangements for his funeral ("I don't want to die like Rock Hudson! I want to live like Sylvia Plath!"). And they are all watched over by the hotel's maternal figure, a 90-year-old woman named Aggie (Helen Shumaker) who lounges around in pajamas and imperial crowns and shrieks "I'm dying! Somebody change me!"

What unites Finley's people — beyond a history of abuse — is a determination to defy roles, whether Victim or Transgressor, scripted for them by forces outside their control. But that very single-mindedness creates its own set of emotional barriers. Chuckles is so bent on keeping his healthy friends from leeching a sense of well-being off of his illness that he won't allow anyone to care for him. Beanie rejects his lot as straight-white-male pig to the point of self-annihilation. "I'm not a provider! I'm not a punisher!" he protests, without the foggiest notion of a viable substitute identity.

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Finley's play squawks and sputters with its own in-your-face defiance. A typical Finley subversion is to set up a cliched life situation and then pull the rug out from under it. At Chuckles' funeral, the air is heavy with stock eulogies until Squeeze explodes in irritation and a bored Chuckles sits up in his coffin to tell them how to get it right. In another instance, Squeeze improbably announces to Beanie that they are going to have a baby; his knee-jerk paternal delight is quickly snuffed out as Squeeze launches into a caustic denunciation of abortion laws.

None of this is ever as provoking or funny as it clearly wants to be. Finley response to dramatic cliché is polemical cliché: This is fortune-cookie playwrighting, stuffed with such crunchy-granola sentiments as "I love you means I control you" and "I'm nothing but a woman, a fool, a concubine, a harem in one body." It's the sort of loaded, damned-if-you-don't claptrap that lets you know you're having an emotionally defensive response if you get angry at it rather than with it.

Most of Finley's actors have done solo performance work themselves, and with one exception they each sink to the droning demands of their material. That exception is Helen Shumaker, achieving the impossible task of simulating a real person who merits our attention. She also handles the requisite nude scene gamely, lying on her belly while two other actors stand over her naked frame and munch raw ears of corn. Seekers of chocolate-smearing outrage should be forewarned that this is about as heady, not to mention caloric, as "Lamb of God Hotel" gets. / ■