

The Ridge Theater and John Moran's cosmic connection.

RIDGE ON THE LEDGE

BY TOM MURRIN

stage

PICKS

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Ridge Theater's prolific cocreators/cohabitators Bob McGrath and Laurie Olinder have produced 28 plays since 1982, but they are best known for their productions with the eccentric playwright John Moran. Their latest, Moran's two-act opera *Mathew in the School of Life Part 1: The Lamb of God*, premieres at The Kitchen this month.

McGrath describes the scenario of their fourth collaboration with Moran: "Mathew is a robot or a hologram built for suffering at the futuristic space station, 'Savior Factory,' that is actually Heaven." Adds Olinder, "This particular Mathew is being programmed by a rebel teacher named Lucy, and she programs him improperly." With Moran's penchant for character multiplications, this leads to apocalyptic results.

"In this show we are going to take a formalistic effect we have been working on to another level: The entire opera — all vocals, sounds and music — will be on tape," says McGrath. Visually, Ridge will continue to work in the sensory-satisfying multimedia structure they have used in the past: film by Bill Morrison and slides by Olinder and Paul Rodriguez, coupled with grand sets (designed and painted by Olinder, constructed by Fred Tietz) and costumes for a large and willing cast of 20 to 25 performers.

Ridge originally performed under



CHRISTOPHER FORTUNA

McGrath and Olinder

the name "Pink," staging sociopolitical plays at downtown clubs and performance spaces, like Barry Plumlee's *White Power* and *I Killed John Belushi* at University of the Streets. In '87, McGrath recalls, they "wanted to do fuller, more serious work" and they changed their name to "Ridge," after the Lower East Side street they lived on. In 1988, they did *Czologsz* by Michael Kaniecki, with Danny Zippi, at P.S. 122, about a man who, having been strangely inspired by the East Village provocateur Emma Goldman, shot President McKinley. McGrath says, "That was the kind of work we changed from 'Pink' to 'Ridge' to do. It was two-and-a-half hours — a full piece, a serious topic."

Soon after, Mark Russell, the artistic director of P.S. 122, called McGrath and "told me about a kid composer from Nebraska, a protégé

of Philip Glass, who had written an opera which he described as 'the Jack Benny show on acid.'" McGrath listened to John Moran's tape — "It sounded like John Lennon's 'The Walrus,' but it was pop theater. We took to it like ducks to water, and it's been that way ever since."

Ridge and the increasingly respected playwright/composer Moran have had extraordinary success together. After the hilarious *Jack Benny!* in 1988 and '89 at P.S. 122 and La MaMa, they did the cryptic *The Manson Family* at Lincoln Center in 1990, and the carnivalesque *Everyday Newt Burman* at La MaMa in '93. Explains McGrath, "On the most important level — the theatrical level — there is a kind of telepathic relationship between John and Ridge. He asks us to do things that may seem strange, but it comes very natural to us. His themes took us in a spiritual direction." Adds Olinder, "We are attracted to the same large, iconic American figures. They don't necessarily have to be already established characters, like Benny or Manson, but the images and the place we put them are all very pop."

McGrath, who shared a '93-'94 Obie with Moran, says, "Ridge is pretty much what I always wanted to do: Have a cool theater company in downtown New York."

***Mathew in the School of Life* opens Oct. 6 for a three-week run, Thurs.-Sun. at 8 p.m., at The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St., 255-5793. \$20. ★**

★ Arden Party's ***The Tragical History of Dr. Faustus***, directed by Randolph Curtis Rand, a stripped-down revisionist production of the Marlowe classic, opens The Faust Festival. Following last year's successful Hamlet Festival, executive director Aaron Beall has "made many deals with the devil" to stage this year's **October to May Festival. Nada, 167 Ludlow St., 420-1466. Oct. 13-24, Wed.-Sat. and Mon., 8 p.m. \$12.**

★ ***Blade to the Heat***, Oliver Mayer's moody macho musical about Latino boxers in the 50's, directed by George C. Wolfe and starring Paul Calderone (*Pulp Fiction*), with fight choreography by ex-middleweight contender Michael Olajide, Jr. **The Public Theater, 425 Lafayette St., 598-7150. Oct. 18-Nov. 27, Tues.-Sun., 8 p.m.; matinees, Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m. \$35.**

★ Salley May's ***Halloween Happening*** features multimedia nightmares pulsating through a horrific haunted house and exorcised by Hong Kong Warrior Women Biker Chicks and Circus Amok acrobats. **P.S. 122, 150 First Ave., 477-5829. Oct. 27-30, Thurs.-Sun., 7:30 p.m. \$8.**

★ ***Hallow Moon***, a week of Halloween gruesomeness from spooky-voiced Edgar Oliver who says, "My skull is a haunted house. Look into my eyes and you will see that ghosts look out the windows." **La MaMa, 74-A E. 4th St., 475-7710. Oct. 27-31, Thurs.-Mon., 10 p.m. \$12.**

★ ***Ow! I Think There's Something In My Neck!*** Rae C. Wright's funny and moving show about coping with her mother's death. **Dixon Place, 258 Bowery, 219-3088. Fri.-Sat. 10:30 p.m. \$7.**

★ ***The Heather Woodbury Report*** finds the prodigious performance artist doing a different "female-centric" half-hour solo every week for nine months in what Woodbury calls "a creative endurance project spanning the time of gestation." **The Fort at Sidewalk Café, 94 Ave. A, 473-7373. Wednesdays at 8 p.m. No cover. ★**

THEATER TRIPS BY RICKY SPEARS

HYSTERICAL BLINDNESS AND OTHER SOUTHERN TRAGEDIES THAT HAVE PLAGUED MY LIFE THUS FAR

A buoyant yet confusing musical one-man show, with a chorus that will send you right to heaven or hell. Based on author Leslie Jordan's experiences as a young Southern Baptist-cum-sit-com actor, *Hysterical Blindness* charts Jordan's course from home to Hollywood. Sprinkled throughout are comments and cameos from the chorus of three dolls and three dudes, all dressed up as a Baptist choir, singing along as Jordan relives his turbulent life. The cantankerous audience loved every minute as it sailed right over my head. **Playhouse on Vandam, 15 Vandam St., 691-1555. Tues.-Fri. 8**

p.m., Sat. 7 and 10 p.m., Sun. 4 and 7 p.m., \$30-\$45.

PHILADELPHIA, HERE I COME!

If plays by Brian Friel such as *Dancing at Lughnasa* and *Wonderful Tennessee* somehow escaped your grasp, *Philadelphia* is a great opportunity to get acquainted with this brilliant Irish playwright. Young Gareth O'Donnell, played by two actors (Jim True and Robert Sean Leonard), creates a unique bit of storytelling as the public Gar (True) grapples with his inner self (Leonard) the night before he's off to America. Three hours of magical words, beautiful, spirited acting — and oh, that Robert Sean Leonard. **Roundabout Theatre Company, 1530 Broadway, 869-8400. Tues.-Sat. 8 p.m., Wed., Sat. and Sun. 2 p.m.,**

through October 16, \$47.50.

THE SECRETARIES

The Five Lesbian Brothers' new piece is an axe-murdering tale of four secretaries at a lumber company. This rabid contemporary piece explores women's roles in society, particularly lesbians, as they face Slim Fast diets, angry bosses and disco. Lesbian Brothers Maureen Angelos, Babs Davy, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey and Lisa Kron are an exciting bunch as they dole out this twisted tale, more akin to performance art than theater. Lots of lezbo kissing and the required finale of bloodshed against the male of the species. **New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., 302-6989. Tues.-Fri. 8 p.m., Sat. 7 and 10 p.m., Sun. 3 p.m., \$22-\$25. ★**