

Let There Be Dark



NANCY CAMPBELL

Eric Bogosian: like a man possessed, a medium, a schizophrenic

By Sally Baner

MEN IN DARK TIMES. A performance written and directed by Eric Bogosian. At the Kitchen, March 18 to 21.

Eric Bogosian's *Men in Dark Times* reworks themes and materials that have appeared in his solos and group works over the past few years. It also raises serious questions about performance art, its means and its subjects, by treading the blurry border between performance and theater, between aggression and satire, between outrage and social criticism.

The evening is what Bogosian calls an "amplified solc." A string of 12 vignettes presents images of men ranging from a terrorist to a TV talk-show host. Although Bogosian is joined by four other performers (Joe Hannan, Grethe Holby, Jeff McMahon, and Marcelino Rosado), his own presence dominates the work. The piece is also amplified in the sense that the action goes beyond the physical body to include taped voices, live and taped music, and slide projections.

The Kitchen is shrouded in black. Bogosian's voice is heard calling for lights, and he is suddenly seen standing in a cone of light at one edge of the space. Dressed in a dark suit, he is elegantly unctuous, an oily version of Rod Serling as he greets us and tells us to "Relax—have a good time." There is something ominous in this mes-

sage, underscored by Bogosian's half-lit face. His patter, then his gestures slither into the spiel of a maniacal circus barker boasting of his freaks. As he exits, the lights come up on the other side of the space, where Hannan plays piano cocktail music and McMahon croons a 1940s-style love song whose lyrics also seem ironically to describe a very contemporary sense of global depression. Bogosian reappears as Ricky Paul, his TV host persona, to trade quips with straightman Hannan about rock stars and mass murderers. After a burst of rapid-fire anecdotes, Bogosian breaks into a smile and Hannan plays a few chords. "Crooked senators, mass murderers, Las Vegas entertainers—they're all just people!" Ricky Paul exclaims, launching into song. "People...people who need people..." Next Bogosian becomes a wild-eyed terrorist holding a woman hostage while demanding free food and electricity, an end to nuclear armament, and "no more nightclubs." He sits at a desk, talking about the power of light, like a two-bit evangelist, and then reads a poem about children getting lost in the dark. He plays a middle-aged Italian day laborer reminiscing about the old gang, a teenage punk miming a guitar player to the sound of the Ramones, a go-go dancer, a sadistic army officer, a bum, and finally, a clean-cut political speaker

who is transformed into a satanic demagogue. The other performers come and go, playing foils and partners, as the action moves around the murky space, suddenly illuminated by a point or slash of light.

Bogosian's brilliance as a performer has been his ability to switch gears instantaneously while operating at the highest pitches of intensity. His personae are so various, each with its distinctive accent, pacing, and vocabulary, that one marvels first at the speed and pliancy of the voice itself, and at the facial expressions and bodily gestures that plastically express the states of that voice. Then one marvels again at the crash-speed hairpin turns voice and body take as they careen along the grotesque landscape of masculine identity. He's like a man possessed, a medium, a schizophrenic. That terrifying, violent tension between control and loss of control, a favorite American theme played out in spheres as diverse as the religious cults and possession films of the '70s and real-life politics in the '80s, is the true subject of Bogosian's performances. And this is the brilliance of Bogosian the scriptwriter. The characters are chilling not only because of the intensity of performance, not

THE KITCHEN

only because of what they are as slices of behavior, but mostly because of the formal dissonance that comes from their scraping together. Bogosian structures the work more like music than like drama, and it is this approach that pushes his pieces more toward performance art than theater.

But there is another kind of dissonance—a raw cognitive screech—in the work. And that is in its sexual meaning. In religious cults and in possession films it is usually a woman or a child who is invaded by multiple voices. Bogosian doubles the tension produced by the notion of control by making men the instruments of fear and dominance.

In *Men in Dark Times*, as in *Men Inside* and *That Girl*, two solos by Bogosian that use some of the same material, there are several kinds of characterizations. One is the familiar, super-ordinary, even slightly stereotyped figure—the middle-aged Italian worker, the soldier. One is the criminal or the outcast—the terrorist, the bum. A third category is the constructed, artificial persona ripped from other performance modes—the circus barker, the TV host, the politician, the preacher. These form the nucleus of the work and they are, I think, its real source of interest—as well as its source of darkness. Here again lies an important boundary between theater, through which Bogosian creates impeccable character sketches, and performance art, through which he not only dazzlingly imitates other modes of public action (performance in its broadest sense) but also subverts those imitations.

When I saw *Men Inside* as an intimate barrage of shattered monologues in a crowded Club 57 a few months ago, I thought Bogosian had found the perfect vehicle for his acceleration-performance. Without special costumes, without added theatrical trappings, the contortions of voice and body were right there, raw, extreme, aggressive. The work struck out at the spectator just because it was so fast, so close. The nightclub venue was plumbed, then turned inside out. The concision of the piece sharpened its slicing edge.

It seems to me that the "amplification" of *Men in Dark Times* dissipates not only its effect, but its meaning. As the piece unfolds in time and space, a certain spring, a certain irony is lost. As with some kinds of punk music that claim to criticize violence but only seem to imitate and valorize it, Bogosian's performance flounders in ambiguities. The sexual, ethnic, and racial jokes previously undercut by structural fragmentation linger here. And like the often sinister images of the men Bogosian creates, they demand a critical commentary.

103

VOICE MARCH 30, 1982