

# Squat Dreams

BY EILEEN BLUMENTHAL

**DREAMLAND BURNS.** A mixed-media theater work by Squat Theater, written and directed by Stephan Balint, at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, 255-5793.

**THE TEMPEST.** The play by William Shakespeare, abridged by Jeffrey Horowitz and Julie Taymor, directed by Julie Taymor, presented by Theatre for a New Audience at CSC Repertory, 136 East 13th Street, 677-4210.

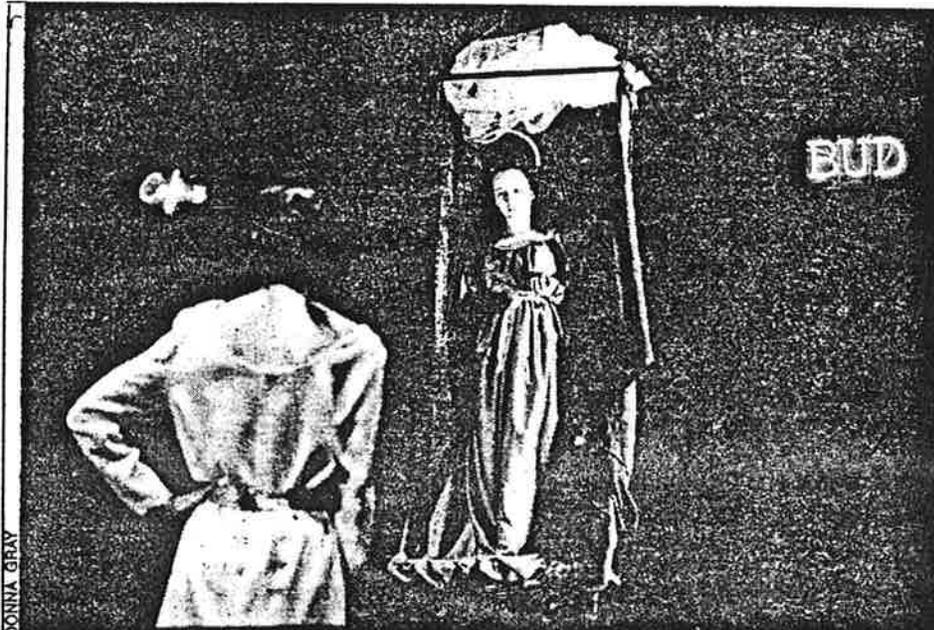
After several works filled with apocalyptic visions—including an ejaculating corpse, Baader-Meinhof terrorists with intergalactic cohorts, a naked, obese witch, and a giant brain-blitzed baby with TV-screen eyes and great earphones to close out the world—Squat Theater has turned its attention to simple domestic matters. *Dreamland Burns* is a tale about the emptiness of life without traditional values. As before, much in the work's social views seems to be in sync with the moral majority: *Pig! Child! Fire!*, *Andy Warhol's Last Love*, and *Mr. Dead and Mrs. Free* all showed a world where social, family, even sentient life are dissolving, where heroes are Satan or Andy Warhol, where the spouse of the liberated woman is "Mr. Dead." As always, however, Squat's medium is so radical, so disobedient, and so stunning that it does not merely camouflage a conservative message but transform it.

*Dreamland* begins with a 45-minute punk-noir film in which a young woman named Alexandra (Eszter Balint) moves into her own apartment, is left by her sleazy boyfriend, Ray, wanders miserably through the New York night, and finally returns home and falls asleep. Her dream begins to materialize on the stage, and its web of images, from the hellish to the sublime, forms the second half of the show.

Characters from Alexandra's life (that is, the film) show up variously distorted—or clarified. Ray, who is a drug dealer planning to work on a Caribbean "fishing boat," appears as a gaucho, singing "I can only love you if you kill for me"; later, he is murdered, and loot and weapons are recovered from inside his body. A weird taxi driver who tried to read Alexandra's palm shows up in the dream in her new apartment, wanting her to star in a film about a rape and murder; during this encounter, which includes a strange explosion and a falling chandelier, Alexandra finds herself paralyzed in a chair. Her friend Jennifer tells her that a religious fanatic who cleans toilets in Macy's is her (Jennifer's) mother. The street alcoholic whom Alexandra stopped to sing with appears now as a wino-cum-wise-

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## THEATER



*Dreamland Burns.* What's alive confronts what's real.

man prophet, telling Alexandra he knows she lost her man and is lonely, that she should not be late for dinner, that she will be happy. A neon-haloed Virgin Mary descends from the fly-space, and the show is over.

The dream action takes place against changing settings, from a photographer's backdrop of palm tree tropics, to a painted stage-curtain, to an impressionistic New York skyline of tiny lights. A life-size yellow taxi, painted on a flat, pops up in an instant, and just as quickly disappears; a hurricane brings chairs, lampshades, and scarves raining into Alexandra's world. Some people in the dream sequence are live (that is, performed on-stage by the actors we saw in the film); others, made by projected images of the film's actors on white-faced mannequins, have a kind of eerie, borderline life.

In fact, questions about what is alive and what is real get so complex in *Dreamland* that this issue becomes the work's central theme. Occasionally, the point is articulated: When the taxi driver (in the dream) is asked if his outlandish story is "true," he says, "I don't know if it's true or not; it just happened." What distinguishes Squat's bleak view of "liberated" society from the Reaganite view is partly that it recognizes complexity and ambiguity. There is always an irony, a self-conscious posturing, in their presentation that flirts with undercutting what would otherwise be its message. Finally, though, it is the medium that becomes the strongest message: Squat's conservatism is overpowered by the company's passion to innovate and amaze.