

THE KITCHEN

VIDEO

MUSIC

DANCE

PERFORMANCE FILM

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Reviews/Theater

Hoping for a Cataclysm on a Rainy Day at Shea

By MEL GUSSOW

Considerably dampened by rain, the Survival Research Laboratories presented its post-apocalyptic performance piece "The Misfortunes of Desire" Thursday night in the parking lot at Shea Stadium. This was, first of all, an exercise in audience survival techniques.

As encouraged, theatergoers arrived an hour before the scheduled start of the performance to insure a good viewing position. A capacity crowd sat on bleachers in a steady drizzle that by the beginning of the show — delayed almost an hour — had turned into a downpour.

Docilely, with umbrellas held aloft, the audience waited until this San Francisco experimental collective activated its elaborate machinery. There were only occasional disgruntled shouts and a few impromptu bars of "Singin' in the Rain" to ease the tedium. The song was itself a pleasant antidote to the heavily amplified accordion music, which might have been more appropriate in a skating rink than in this simulated war zone.

After all the anticipation, the show was anticlimactic. It did not live up to the advance publicity about menace and danger. As the robotic equipment roamed around the debris-filled parking lot, the soundtrack was replaced by Frankensteinian rumbles and occasional horror-movie voices. Arrows were shot from a cannon and lazily drifted over the landscape. Then a huge wheel lumbered into motion and rolled straight toward a parking-lot lamppost. Worried workers quickly shoved the wheel on a safer course.

After the audience was blanketed by stage fog, a flame thrower added a bit of flair and fire — a struggle in the damp circumstances — and managed to ignite a towering, windowed struc-

ture. Gradually, the detritus was reduced to rubble. About an hour after it began, "The Misfortunes of Desire" crept to its cataclysmic conclusion. When I left, the parking lot looked like a trash heap.

It is difficult, of course, to measure the effect of the inclement weather on the performance. One would have to see a Survival Research show on a clement evening, but my guess is that the rain actually added a measure of theatricality to the event. During the interminable wait, one kept wondering if the performance would ever take place, and if it did, whether a machine might short-circuit.

There was something demoralizing about watching "The Misfortunes of Desire," expressing as it did only negative impulses — and not in the same sense that Jean Tinguely sculptures would self-destruct. In that case, the disintegration made an artistic statement. The Survival Research team apparently thrives on chaos and on creating — and destroying — non-art. Compared to a "Mad Max" movie, the effects were nothing special.

While the show was going on, camera crews recorded it for posterity, as it were. "The Misfortunes of Desire" may make a more vivid impression on film or tape, but on location in the rain in the Shea Stadium parking lot it was less exciting than watching a building under construction.

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