

Downtown May 13, 1992

Theater Around Town

by David Kaufman

America By Finley

THE LAMB OF GOD HOTEL at the Kitchen (CLOSED)

"This isn't the Howard Johnson's, is it?" asks Beanie shortly after checking in at *The Lamb of God Hotel*, a new play by Karen Finley that pursues and extends her notorious outrage over the current state of human affairs. Finley's latest site is obviously more of a flop-house than a HoJo's, though the difference ultimately may be negligible in terms of who tends to check in at each and what tends to go on there.

The title refers to Finley's longstanding metaphor which sees us as poor little "lamb" who have lost our way in the thicket of a system that rewards only greed, corruption, and power, whether in the service of political, sexual, or economic ends. If Beanie is described as a man who "can fuck a whore" but "can't make love" to his wife, he's come to the right place. The motto here is, "It's better to feel abuse than to feel nothing at all." After her brave and decade-long battle-cry from the trenches of the East Village, this motto can be interpreted as Finley's as well: her savage railing against a culture and a society that have done all they can to repress real feelings and obfuscate anything approximating the truth in favor of a feel-good, quick-fix mentality.

Beanie (Andy Soma) encounters three other guests or regulars at the Lamb of God Hotel, beginning with Chuckles (Hapi Phace), the desk clerk who greets him and tries every now and then to provide some black comic relief. Squeeze (Amy

Elliott), the resident whore, was impregnated by her own father as a youth and never recovered from the scars, either physically or emotionally. Aggie (Helen Shumaker), an elderly and incontinent woman, might be dying as she claims, but she also proves the feistiest of the group.

All four of these figures are victims of abused childhoods or abandonment at various points in their lives, and during the course of the 90-minute evening, they take turns role-playing various family members in their respective pasts. Though they remain distinctive types, their lines become interchangeable laments: "No one loves me. No one's ever loved me." "The only feelings I have are no feelings at all." "I'm damaged." "If you have to kill someone, make sure it's a member of your family." "We live in a world that loves to kill beautiful things." "By staying out of a relationship, I avoid getting hurt." "Tell me about your dreams and how they shattered." "Whatever happened to hope?" "I never felt cared for, I never felt loved."

At one point Beanie recites a list of the countless therapies he's undergone, from Freudian analysis to Weight Watchers. But as Chuckles tells him, "You're still fucked up." Eventually Chuckles reveals he has tested positive for AIDS and that he plans to kill himself. In the final segment all participate in a mock funeral he has scripted for himself, which he considers his "work of art." And in the end, Aggie divulges that Squeeze and Chuckles "are my replacement children for the daughter I killed," before killing herself. The closing line, delivered by Chuckles, could be read as an epitaph for a generation that has been left to wallow in its loneliness and alienation: "I was waiting for a miracle. It just never came."

Though Finley is more known for her performance art and solo diatribes or monologues, all of her familiar themes are accommodated in *Lamb of God Hotel*. But if this is only her second play, it is less structured than her first, *The Theory of Total Blame*, was, and less effective for it. The play has been directed by the author with mundane results. With an emphasis on screaming for attention and delicious nastiness, only Shumaker manages to create a vital characterization, as Aggie.

VIDEO MUSIC DANCE PERFORMANCE FILM LITERATURE

1971
20
1991
THE KITCHEN