

THE KITCHEN



DONA ANN MCADAMS

Karen Finley's *Lamb of God Hotel*: life in a metaphysical flophouse

By Michael Feingold

Lamb of God Hotel

By Karen Finley
The Kitchen

512 West 19th Street
255-5793

Candide

By Len Jenkin, based on Voltaire
CSC Repertory
136 East 13th Street
677-4210

Shlmada

By Jill Shearer

Broadhurst Theatre (Closed)

A Small Family Business

By Alan Ayckbourn
Music Box Theatre

Broadway and 45th Street
239-6200

"It's better to feel abused than to feel nothing at all," runs the motto of the metaphysical flophouse where Karen Finley's *Lamb of God Hotel* takes place. This may not sound much like "service with a smile," but the four victimized strays who gather in Finley's *salon des rejetés* have their author's humor and compassion, as well as her more widely publicized rage. While bidding for each other's sympathy and nurture, they're always ready to slap down rival claimants, kid their own desperation, shove the proffered consolation aside with a stinging rebuke, and then leap forward in tender empathy, making themselves the nurturers and their would-be consolers the consoled. Where Finley's solo pieces build outward from a personal sense of grievance, like the *kommoi* of Greek tragedy, *Lamb of God Hotel* is a wry festival of competing counterclaims, agonies clashing with each other in a race for precedence.

A gay man, HIV-positive, plans his suicide and memorial service; a prostitute reenacts the trauma, childhood rape followed by illegal abortion, which has left her unable to bear children; an inconti-

nent old woman fights off obsessive memories of an abusive husband; a repressed middle-class nerd gapes and meddles while the other three claw through their battles, jumping their crossed wires with childhood miseries of his own. The material may seem to come from case histories, tabloid news stories, or melodrama, but Finley's avatars, like her, are feisty; they never take their miseries lying down, but get a kind of fizzy exhilaration from being able to complain, to analyze, to fight back.

Articulating a grievance is the first step toward redressing it; the outrageous liberties, of language and emotional trespass, that the characters constantly take with one another release them, soaringly, from the inhibitions of a society that's been programmed for decades to pretend no grievances exist: It's better to feel abused than to feel nothing at all. Brashly wide-ranging in its shifts of tone, leaping with the playfulness of an ornamental fountain into cascades of feeling or spurts of epigram, Finley's language has the feel of Off-Off writing from the early '60s, when the joy of opening formerly sealed-off avenues of discourse made all kinds of change seem possible. The difference is, her characters know it ain't so; their splashy comebacks have the vinegary aftertaste of futility that comes with loss of hope.

If their openness sets them free, that still doesn't get these drifters anywhere in a society so hemmed in by its endless replication of grievances like their own. The end is a death not followed, like the evening's earlier mock deaths, by the deceased's leaping back up with a wisecrack; the last line is "I was waiting for a miracle. It just never came." This doesn't make Finley a futilitarian—her lively writing's enough to refute that—but one who calls things as she sees them, which is painfully close

to how they really are. One has to add, with some regret, that she doesn't always see how things might be improved directorially. The evening passes easily enough, but not with a lot of shape to its scenes or strong forward movement. The four actors seem to be living in their own cubicular worlds; only Helen Shumaker, as the old woman, makes hers the world of the play as a whole, riveting the house with the cynical magpie caws that thunder out of her cherubic presence.