

the monitored, makes *Timon* as theatrically lively as it's ever likely to

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Strahs Man

By Marc Robinson

Queer & Alone

The Kitchen
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Greg Mehrtens plumps the pillows, leans back languorously on his bed, and with a leer reveals his incandescent blue silk pajamas. It's a pose that's both beckoning and cautionary, with the hauteur of Manet's *Olympia*. Warming to the role of a voluptuary named Desmond Farrquahr, he begins to chronicle a chaotic sea voyage to the Far East. The story is less interesting than the manner in which it is told. Mehrtens's voice dripping with bitter humor. Even if the paragraphs weren't often interrupted with his world-weary sighs, the syntax would still seem tortuous, as Mehrtens's emphatic theatricality turns ordinary phrases into pronouncements.

The rhythms ooze. Each sentence is like a smirk. In Mehrtens's drawl, the words "Hong Kong" sound obscure, with as much as

James Strahs's 1987 novel, from which this is adapted, needs just such a lush delivery. On the page, his prose lacks momentum and spontaneity; quotation marks bracket so many words that the intended campy disdain instead seems labored. There is effortfulness, too, in Ron Vawter and Marianne Weems's version, but, at its best, the effort is calculated and provocative. Desmond's stories fail to seduce—not because they are abstruse (although they are), but rather because Vawter and Weems don't want you to ignore his setting. Desmond's chaise is actually a hospital bed; the polished nightstand holds pills, hypodermics, and elixirs; and near a beautiful Japanese screen and antique radio sits a plastic bedpan. Mehrtens suddenly looks and sounds more like the old Tennessee Williams, bleary-eyed and catatonic, Second in hand.

Conveying the poignancy of this contrast is easy—the bedridden man of the world now able to travel only in his bed. What's

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FEINGOLD

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get. Duke Ellington's bouncy Jazz Age score energizes the party scenes and gives the later laments a foundation in the blues, at once setting the play in the not-so-distant past and giving it a retro-chic contemporaneity. The company's strong in older actors: Michael Lombard, Tom Lacy, and Nicholas Kepros get all the juice that can be gotten out of Timon's ungrateful pals, while Jack Ryland nearly steals the show as the faithful steward Flavius, his worry over Timon seeming to engrave itself deeper on his face with every scene.

On the other hand, Langham's taste in young actors seems to range from the colorless to the pip-squeaky, with Derek Smith's Poet and Michael Rudko's Second Senator the worst of a sorry lot. Nor has he done much to integrate their attempts at character drawing into the action: Things like Richard Holmes's tantrum as the disaffected servant Hortensius, or the three thieves' varied responses to Timon's attack, fall limply into an embarrassed void, as if the director hadn't noticed they were happening. For all Langham's proficiency, which makes the evening a vivid and substantial one, there's a bland side to his taste, a sense of imagination made cozy.

Brian Bedford, fortunately, is too good and serious an actor to settle for the easy. Bubbling with nonstop verve through the early scenes, an overeager puppy, he turns, when the ax falls, to yelps and moans that show the sensu-

dicting his false friends. Shakespeare asks Timon to roar against humanity, and roaring isn't in Bedford's range, but he pumps up both the volume and the intensity of his whimper as far as he can without fakery: The general effect is of a fine, scrupulous artist tackling a part nature hasn't endowed him for. But the play's so rarely seen, and so lucidly articulated here, that the three-quarters of Timon Bedford can give loom mightily large, with thoughts stringently applicable to our shrunken time.

More such thoughts are scattered through the cheerful, creaky chaos of *A Quarrel of Sparrows*, a bad play full of good things. A commercial comedy, almost chintzily old-fashioned in form, that attempts to discuss religion seriously is an idea so antique it's nearly avant-garde; flashes of mordancy in James Duff's play even recall the last good specimen, Maugham's *Loaves and Fishes*. Duff's hero is a playwright who gets a vision from Above just as he and his actress wife are about to sign an immense Hollywood contract; the inevitable complications occur in the house of his godfather, a retired harpist (!), whose fundamentalist sister just happens to be visiting from Down South. (The hero's agent, inevitably, just happens to be Jewish and his wife Catholic, while his best buddy practices something EST-ian called The System.)

Not much of substance gets conveyed; the collision of theme and genre leaves vast, gaping holes in both. On the other hand, there are several very funny scenes, often involving John C.

and Duff's verbal knuckleballs can drop right through the strike zone. "You're the only one on earth I can trust," the hero tells the harpist. "Everyone else I know is in the theater." Polly Holliday's sunny, scampering performance as the fundamentalist and Jan Hooks's ferocious tantrums as the wife do a good deal to brighten this messy but appealing corner of the theater. ■

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harder, and what this production sometimes achieves, is showing how the need to perform never subsides. Even vulnerable moments, when a humiliating reality would shatter anyone else's fantastic nostalgia, cannot weaken that need. If anything, the performance intensifies. After one particularly overheated episode, Desmond prepares a hypodermic and injects himself in his abdomen and ritualizes his pain: He emits coy soprano squeaks, ogles us, then dabs some extra medicine behind his ears.

The events of Desmond's tale themselves are performances of one kind or another—usually sexual roughhousing, remarkably vulgar at times, and violent retribution. But, as in Strahs's novel, the plot keeps getting in the way: So many strands of intrigue demand attention that before long the strands end up tying Desmond to the ground.

The production, too, often seems tentative. Anytime Desmond has to engage in conversation with other characters, the play grinds to an embarrassing halt. If only Vawter and Weems



PAULA COURT/THE KITCHEN

Mehrten: a beckoning pose

to the baroque to the extreme: His longing to indulge in style would succeed in distracting from the trivial incident, and the frustrated effort to outwit the banality of illness would seem more daring.

"Oh, if someone could make me whole," says Desmond at the end. It's his one sincere sentence all evening. Of course, it also suggests the impulse behind travel—and the art that travel inspires. *Queer & Alone* isn't whole, yet—which is disappointing, but also what makes it strangely fascinating. The agenda is still open, as with a trip in which the journey is more interesting than the destination. This production looks best when Mehrten enjoys a tone of voice for a while, or considers in what pose his crimson robe looks sharpest—getting his sea legs, still looking around. His ocean cruise is a work in progress. ■

GREENE

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he sees creative life as a way to overcome the pain of everyday

of *Light Shall Lift Them*, which comes from a euphoric contemporary review of Barrette in *Theatre Arts Monthly*, implies the regenerative power of art. At the end, the mortal artist dies, and the inspiration figure briefly succumbs, too, lying on the stage floor, draping himself with a sheet. But then he rises, to dance off through the mirror, an image of hope and the persevering imagination.

If the new piece embraces Kelly-esque themes, its linear story reaches for a clarity that critics have occasionally accused him of lacking. *AKIN*, an intricate, rococo collage conceived around the figure of the medieval troubadour, was trounced as opaque by some reviewers, and Kelly intends to protect himself from that charge with a structure that's fairly straightforward. In the high-profile crucible of BAM, "I feel I'm not allowed to fuck up."

But he takes risks anyway. He had never tackled the trapeze, so for the past year he's been studying with Russian coach Irina Gold. "It keeps life interesting. Physical challenges." Usually, Kelly performs and sings to existing music, often on tape. For the first time, he is using a completely original orchestral and vocal score, composed by Bill Obrecht. He feels the change lends a new, formal quality to his work.

But the loneliest risk is to feel that even with music, dance, film, other performers, his performance must galvanize the whole. "Despite the orchestra," Cocteau wrote about Barrette, "his act appears, from far away, to happen along dream paths, in a place where sounds are no longer heard, as if it had been conjured