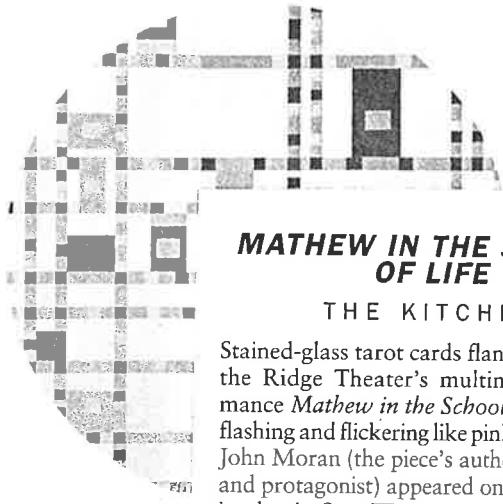


# ARTFORUM

DECEMBER 1995 \$7.00 224-15

I N T E R N A T I O N A L



## MATHEW IN THE SCHOOL OF LIFE

### THE KITCHEN

Stained-glass tarot cards flanked the set of the Ridge Theater's multimedia performance *Mathew in the School of Life*, n.d., flashing and flickering like pinball machines. John Moran (the piece's author, composer, and protagonist) appeared on stage dressed in classic *Star Wars* gear, aping Michael Jackson's moon-walk to a score of soaring strings, vocoded voices, and myriad other sound effects. Replete with pop cultural quotations, "found sound," slide projections, and educational filmstrips, *Mathew in the School of Life* played like a primer in performative pastiche. Though billed as a "sci-fi musical theatre work," this post-Modern parable about a "robot angel" tuned to absorb human misery is really more hi-fi than sci-fi. One watches with the same degree of engagement with which, well, one watches a pinball machine: somewhat involved but aware that the quarters (and time) would be better spent on laundry.

Though scrupulously choreographed so that performers could lip-synch the prerecorded dialogue, any semblance of kinetic energy has been zapped from these live bodies, along with any eroticism and/or danger. Apart from the decidedly goofy moments, including a walk through a Disney-like environment with actors simulating the herky-jerky movements of funhouse figures, this ballet of autonomic jolts and jabs was stale and gimmicky. However, Daniel Safer—a nuclear fusion of Clara Barton and Sandra Bernhard—deserves special mention as Mathew's menacing but

maternal nurse. He manages to raise his performance above a battery of tics and twitches; Safer, despite his name, communicates pure, Expressionistic danger.

In fact, there is much textbook Expressionism in Bob McGrath's staging, and, at its best, *Mathew* is a pale copy of Strindberg's *The Dream Play*, 1902. Like Indra's daughter, Mathew encounters a depraved human species, but Moran has put his own futuristic, apocalyptic spin on Strindberg's dramatic sequence. Police are piranha-like bad guys (à la *Terminator 2*) and only mindless counting ditties (the kind that simply intone random numbers (à la *Sesame Street*) comfort poor Mathew. Indeed, those PBS songs of yore stand as a good metaphor for the production as a whole: dippy, tuneful catalogues of numerals that never add up.

—Steven Drukman



John Moran and Bob McGrath, *Mathew In The School of Life*, n.d.  
Performance view. Photo: Laurie Olinder.

