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Upcoming Reviews

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The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller

Open: 09/10/10- Close: 10/03/10

Reviewed for TheaterOnline.com By:

Taking as its jumping off point the real-life disappearance in 1961 of the 23-year-old son of New York Governor Nelson Rockefeller in the Asmat region of Papua, New Guinea, "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller" is a six-course meal. Expertly directed by Alfred Preisser (founder of The Classical Theatre of Harlem and frequent collaborator of Melvin Van Peebles) from Jeff Cohen's sophisticated script based on a short story by Christopher Stokes, and starring a superbly understated ensemble, the play makes a strong case that spiritual destruction and artistic corruption are equal to any physical savagery.



On a smartly minimalist, bare black stage save for a center platform, and safari-hued ribbons of fabric hanging in the wings, an awkward and naïve young scion (Aaron Strand) arrives seeking a particular craftsman whose artwork he covets among the bare-chested, face-painted warriors of the Asmat tribe. But appearances can be deceiving in faraway lands, and in "The Man Who Ate Michael Rockefeller," every Third World cliché is soon turned on its head. In a feat of theatrical jiu-jitsu the show plants us firmly in the Asmat world by westernizing its tribal characters' speech and mannerisms. Though the artist Rockefeller has come to meet, the equally naïve Designing Man (a sweetly earnest Daniel Morgan Shelley), may wear a bone through his nose, he addresses the audience in perfect English as he narrates this fatal, culture clash tale. Rockefeller, on the other hand, can only manage halting English or singsong gibberish when conferring with his slick, bilingual guide Bringing Man (David Brown, Jr. of "The Exonerated" fame). It is Rockefeller, the lone white man, who becomes the unrecognizable foreigner, spewing silly lines like "I am a monkey fucker," to express his gratitude for a meal.

And it's precisely this thrill of seeing men in loincloths and women in macramé-type getups become the familiar, even while the character from the good old U.S.A. appears more and more "other" to our eyes, that makes "Michael Rockefeller" so riveting. Right from the start Bringing Man enthusiastically explains to Designing Man that Rockefeller is "totally monkey shit for your stuff." "Why are they whispering? It's not like we have any idea what they're saying," snorts Half-Moon Terror - a duplicitous character straight out of Shakespeare played to perfection by David King - as Bringing Man and Rockefeller huddle conspiratorially. As he puts on the ceremonial headdress bearing the skull of his father Designing Man makes small talk with his wife Breezy (Shannon A.L. Dorsey, also possessing killer comedic chops) as if readying for a dinner party - which he is. "Have you

seen my fox fur headpiece? The red one?" Breezy asks later on. Indeed, while the show's theme is loaded, it's also loaded with laughs, which makes "Michael Rockefeller" that rare thinking man's comedy.

But words and movement are the true stars of the show, exemplified by the play's centerpiece, a hilarious conversation about "speculating" between Half-Moon Terror's very pregnant wife Plentiful Bliss (a terrific Tracy Jack, who is also credited with the choreography) and Designing Man as he "shapes" her baby with his "shaping tool." Translation: the nymphomaniac Plentiful and hapless Designing Man engage in acrobatic intercourse while holding a didactic discussion that pushes the envelope of absurdity. This is physical comedy at its finest - and Preisser's pacing is right on the money. The scene segues effortlessly from hyperactive screwball antics to a slow tender moment between Designing Man and the wife he adores. (Alas, according to our hero, "There is no Asmat word for what the missionaries call love.")

"Asmat is a culture whose art is necessary," Designing Man tells us, even while he himself is tempted by the narcissistic, artistic glory that Rockefeller's fandom has brought. The conflict between Third World community versus First World individualism comes to a head, so to speak, when Designing Man is ultimately forced into avenging a mysterious death - standing up for what's right by perhaps doing wrong. By the time the actors' fists sound ominous drumbeats on the platform, and dancers whirl threateningly under chaotic flashing lights, the arrogance of mistaking the Asmats for our own - of projecting our morality onto them - comes as nothing less than a shocking revelation. Yes, deep down we're all the same. Only we're really not.

Venue:

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West End Theatre : 263 West 86th Street

