



FRIDAY, MAY 03, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "MANUELA INFANTE," OR REVENGE OF THE PLANT KINGDOM

ESTADO VEGETAL *** out of ****
BARYSHNIKOV ARTS CENTER

If monologist Anna Deavere Smith could dance and preferred fiction to non, she might come up with something like the oddball pleasures of *Estado Vegetal*. This one person performance piece belongs at the Baryshnikov Arts Center for two good reasons. First, it was workshopped at the BAC in 2016. Second, every gesture, every movement by performer Marcela Salinas has purpose and effect. It's a bold, fascinating and slightly nutty work that will reward those of an...expansive nature when it comes to the arts. This is the sort of show that begins simply, with a man answering questions from an unseen police officer. By the end, actors don ceramic pots, then a giant plant gets the spotlight along with a microphone while you confidently wait to hear what it has to say and it seems quite reasonable to do so.

You can think of *Estado Vegetal* in several ways. It's a manifesto for the plant kingdom, those members of this planet perhaps unfairly ravaged by homo sapiens.

It's also a one person show where Salinas captivantly embodies the members of a neighborhood reeling from a tragic "accident." The branches of a massive old tree hit some power lines late at night, plunging their street into darkness just as young fireman Manuel comes roaring down the road on his motorcycle. Salinas delivers monologues by a host of people including a city worker in charge of green spaces, a little girl who loves the tree, a busybody sticking her nose into everyone else's business, the mother of Manuel and more.

And it's also perhaps a mystery of sorts, with the prime suspect hiding in plain sight and boasting the rock-solid alibi of all arboreal criminals -- trees can't move or think or act. Can they?



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

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THEATER: 'BLKS' IS

Here's a video about the piece when it was being developed at BAC in 2016. Needless to say, elements may have changed since then, but it nicely captures the artists and their creative processes.



Estado Vegetal is admirable and fun to watch, especially in the strong earlier half where one character after another comes to life through a combination of dialogue, movement, lighting and playful props. The piece was created by both director Manuela Infante and star Salinas, assisted strongly by the set, costume and lighting of Rocio Hernández. I see no credit for sound design but voice recording was done by Pol del Sur and sound is a major player in the show's effect, with a looping device giving Salinas the freedom to "interview" herself as well as create aural collages that do everything from mirror the crosstalk of two humans to encompassing a roaring inferno.

However, *Estado Vegetal* is also an intense work of movement and sound that demands close attention. Pieces like this are hard to maintain for an hour; *Estado Vegetal* runs an unwise 90 minutes. Worse, it builds to a climactic moment in which the plants of the world finally give voice to their demands. (From the sound of it, humans are in for a world of hurt.) The scene is effective and so freighted with grand finale symbolism (a fog machine, a sound collage that builds and builds in cataclysmic power, lighting that glows with doom and then fades to black, etc.) I naturally assumed we had reached the end.

But no, a substantial portion of the show remained. That portion is fascinating in its own right. Yet it feels extraneous; intellectually I understand it's not, but still.... Worse the plotting is more elliptical and vague than the relatively easy to follow chorus of voices that preceded it. Yes, it all ties together (even a detour into the gothic) and the philosophical ideas embodied in a flashback with Manuel give firmer voice to the show's intentions. Nonetheless, one felt impatient towards the end, an unhappy response to a work made with intelligence and passion. After all, many people talk to their plants. But very few listen for a response.

SERIOUSLY FUNNY

MUSIC: CHRIS THILE CAPS
CARNEGIE HALL
RESIDENCY WL...

THEATER: CIRQUE DU
SOLEIL GETS ITS MOJO
BACK

THEATER: HANS CHRISTIAN
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NOTE: This piece has just one more performance in NYC on May 3. But co-writer/director Manuela Infante is a major talent to keep an eye out for when she returns to the city. And those interested in getting a new perspective on plants might enjoy the delightful work of popular science *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* by Peter Wohlleben. It was a bestseller across Europe.

THEATER OF 2019

Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public ** 1/2
Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ***
Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public ** 1/2
Choir Boy ** 1/2
White Noise ** 1/2
Kiss Me, Kate ***
Ain't No Mo' *** 1/2
Ain't Too Proud **
The Cradle Will Rock * 1/2
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Beetlejuice **
Estado Vegetal ***
Hans Christian Andersen

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