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## They Be Foolish Mortals Who Love the Nightlife

By Peter Marks

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If music be the food of love, “The Donkey Show” is a bowl of jalapenos. This rollicking hour of sex, drugs and sweaty gyrations marries the 70’s disco craze to, of all things, the work of William Shakespeare.

Its title could have been “A Donna Summer Night’s Dream.” Shakespeare’s lovers are lost here in cocaine-induced euphoria rather than in an enchanted forest. Oberon is a sleazy club owner, Tytania an exotic dancer, Puck a drug pusher on roller skates. They converse in a kind of discospeak: the entire show is lip-synched to 25-year-old hits like “I Love the Nightlife,” “Never Knew Love Like This Before” and “Car Wash.”

The enterprise might have been a garish mismatch, the equivalent of a tuxedo worn with platform shoes. But wouldn’t you know, “The Donkey Show” is a lark, an exuberant and witty splicing of disparate sources. Its creators, Diane Paulus and Randy Weiner, stage the show as if it were a bacchanal, the sort of libido-driven drugfest on associates with the heyday of Studio 54 and the coke-snorting 70’s and the early 80’s.

The revels of this environmental production take place in an honest-to-goodness club, El Flamingo, on West 21<sup>st</sup> Street between 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> Avenues in Chelsea, where the experience is meant to mimic real clubgoing. Ticket-holders line up outside the doors, waiting for the bouncer Rico to wave them in; once inside, they go to the bar or dance to the incessant throbbing of “On the Radio.” Slowly the cast members, who have been mingling with the audience (the men wear little more than spandex briefs), evolve into characters, and we’re gradually drawn into the whirlwind farce of Shakespeare’s confused lovers, Helena and Demetrius, Hermia and Lysander.

Here they’re called Helen and Dimitri, Mia and Sander, and the romantic traumas that befall them in the disco — presided over, of course, by a platter-spinning DJ (Kevin Shand) — are modeled on those of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” That all four parts are played by women, two of whom are disguised by unconvincing mustaches, in no way alters the recipe for comedy. Something vaguely androgynous has always attended this romp in the woods, which “The Donkey Show” cheekily re-affirms.

“Midsummer” has been retold a thousand ways; translating it into discoese is not the foolhardy exercise one might expect. The play, a catalogue of the pitfalls associated with impetuous love, is a series of disasters brought on by petty jealousies, intemperate advances and superficial attractions — the perfect material, it turns out, for a 70’s pop-song cycle. Ms. Paulus, director of last season’s moving “Running Man,” and Mr. Weiner, who is credited with the “conception” of “The Donkey Show,” do a terrific job of choosing well-known songs that match the productions moods and intentions.

When, for instance, a distraught lover is abandoned on the dance floor, she sings, “Don’t Leave Me This Way.” A moment of anguished fury is underlined by “Enough is Enough.” And when one of the newly aroused paramours emerges from the drug den that Puck (Roman Pietrs) operates out of a back room in the club, he announces his newfound attraction with “You Sexy Thing.” (Substituting angel dust for fairy dust is one of the show’s funnier ideas.)

Audience members, most of whom stand on the dance floor (a smaller number sit at tables) are herded expertly out of the way by the actors, who prowl every available inch of El Flamingo. The playing of each song bring cheers: they are so evocative of their era you can practically feel the polyester chafing your skin.

The actors are what you would call deeply committed to this material, gallivanting without overdoing it. Maria Torres, the choreographer, devises smart parodies of the hustle and other period dances, which are athletically performed by, among others, Tytania’s buff fairies (played by Oscar Estevez, Luke Miller, Dan Cryer and Quinn as a kind of a scantily clad backup group for a Liza Minnelli special).

Anna Wilson, as the siren-like Tytania, offers a performance of bona fide poise, and Jordin Ruderman and Emily Hellstrom are well matched in the low comedy roles of Vinnie One and Vinnie Two, who take the place of Bottom and Shakespeare’s other rude mechanicals in the story. The four lovers, portrayed by Ms. Ruderman, Ms. Hellstrom, Ms. Wilson and Rachel Benbow Murdy, are appealingly clownish hams.

The only aspect of “The Donkey Show” that doesn’t quite gel is the donkey: Mr. Weiner and Ms. Paulus do not make sense of the Vinnies’ transformation and so we never buy the seduction scene (although the donkey piñata is a nice touch). Otherwise, it’s a cool party.