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Not Your Mother's Musical, and That's the Point

By Eric V. Copage

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Puck is gliding on roller skates through a rather misty haze that fills the dance floor, making mischief, as Puck does, with the passions of Tytania, Sander and Dimitri. This isn't fairyland, but rather theater, and it's done to the pounding beat of such 70's dance hits as "Disco Inferno."

It's "The Donkey Show," an hour-long adaptation of "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which opened on Aug. 18 for a six-week run at a real club, El Flamingo in Chelsea, where the audience can stand around the "stage" and even dance on it to the disco hits of 20 years ago before the play even begins.

It is through music, rather than any traditional form of theater, that Shakespeare's comedy about the vagaries of love is told. Is this new production merely a cabaret curiosity or the beginnings of a more or less new sort of theater emerging from below Houston Street? Peter Marks, in his review in *The New York Times*, called the show "a lark, an exuberant and witty splicing of disparate sources."

Diane Paulus and her husband, Randy Weiner, who started the Project 400 Theater Group and who are creators and directors of the show, say their theatrical contrivance is literate fun. They say they believe the show is an indication of things to come in the theater, at least downtown.

There are other downtown theater groups and individuals — The Faux Real Theater Company, Expanded Arts, Dead Mecca and the Present Company, for instance — trying to find new ways to make theater relevant to younger audiences. To Ms. Paulus and Mr. Weiner, theater has become the flying wedge of a downtown sensibility expressed most consistently in the previous decade through music and especially the visual arts.

John Clancy, artistic director of the Present Company and a founder of the Fringe Festival, a showcase for the last three summers of experimental theater, said that Project 400 was among the smartest groups working downtown.

"They never just throw something on stage because it looks cool," he said. "They are always asking: 'What does it mean? How does it add to the story?' That is how they can take something that seems like it will be campy — Shakespeare retold through disco songs — and make it work. Because these songs really do tell the story, they are not just grafted to the plot line. Project 400 shows a commitment to populist theater that isn't diluted or watered down."

"The Donkey Show" had run on Thursdays from January to June at the Pyramid Club in the East Village and weekends last summer and fall at the Piano Store on the Lower East

Side. Project 400 seeks to be part of the long tradition of twisting the confines of theater that probably started even before women began portraying women on the stage.

Generally every theatrical innovator has his own agenda. In the 60's Julian Beck, a founder of the Living Theater with his wife, Judith Malina, "would walk up to you and practically assault you," said Bill Talon, an actor, director and writer who performs a great deal downtown. "His attitude was, 'I'm right, and this is what I'm going to teach you,'" he continued. "Today I don't think there is generally the luxury or even the desire to be didactic. To be a teacher."

David Finkelstein, a 38-year-old writer and director, says that even in experimental theater the downtown focus is on money and on fame, and that this may be a fatal flaw. While emphasizing that he has not seen the work of Project 400, he said he was familiar with the Lower East Side theater scene.

"In terms of listening to people talking, there was a tremendous amount of creativity going into the question of survival and how to make theater in this climate when no funding is available," said Mr. Finkelstein, artistic director of Lake Ivan Performance Group, which specializes in improvisational theater.

As a group, Mr. Finkelstein said, he found downtown theater people dedicated to "marketing to create a sense that there is an exciting scene going on the Lower East Side."

"But I didn't hear a lot of conversation in which people talked with excitement about performance technique or directorial technique or playwriting," he said.

Ms. Paulus denies sacrificing content for marketing hype. She and Mr. Weiner have their own sense of their antecedents and what Project 400 is trying to add to the mix.

Believing in Antonin Artaud's concept that all theater should be ritual, transformative rather than merely entertaining, Mr. Weiner said: "We are asking the audience to go on a journey that is experiential, literally. We are asking them to partake in a very active way, in being shoulder to shoulder in the action."

He said he was taking ritual theater and placing it in a modern pop context, the rock concert.

"A ritual has to mean something in your life," Mr. Weiner said. "We are incorporating things that are not necessarily part of the solipsistic theater world but are part of culture."

They are much affected by hip-hop because "it is tapping into what is cutting edge in the culture today," Ms. Paulus said. "Hip-hop's pounding beat makes it visceral, and it is about putting things in a different context," she said about sampling, the practice of taking a snippet of a song and combining it with other snippets to create something new.

“I want to reach people who don’t go to the theater, because they are the ones who want to be enthralled, challenged,” she said. “I feel music is what people care about in a loyal, passionate way, and I want that audience.”

Ms. Paulus has directed the Off Off Broadway play “Running Man.” She and Mr. Weiner’s first production was a rock musical adaptation of “The Tempest.” Both are Harvard graduates.

Project 400 was founded in 1993 in New York, but the idea for it came a year or so earlier in Wisconsin.

“We worked with the hottest local band in the country and asked them to work on the score of what we were doing, and that was how we learned to create populist theater,” Ms. Paulus said. “People were coming because of the band.”

She said they began doing “bar sets”: a group of six to seven songs from the show in local taverns to lure the audience to the local theater.

Since then they have staged productions in New York and Cambridge, Mass. Among them: a production of “Phaedra” using instrumental tracks released by Stax-Volt, the popular 60’s-era rhythm-and-blues record company, and an adaptation of “Frankenstein,” using melodies from the piano music of Bartok, Beethoven and Dvorak, coupled with lyrics by Mr. Weiner. Their next project will be a hip-hop “Lohengrin.”

“I see all art forms as being intimately connected,” said Mr. Weiner.