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THEATER REVIEW

Home, Terrifying Home: The Not-So-Scenic Tour

By JASON ZINOMAN

"The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home," a mood piece written and directed by Josh Fox, is not one of those plays in which you settle into your chair and passively let the actors take over for a few hours. Mr. Fox, one of the most adventurous impresarios of the New York avant-garde, keeps the audience moving through the entire show, constantly shifting the stage and the focus of the action.

Working with themes of looming apocalypse and a society constantly in fear, Mr. Fox creates a collage of images and snatches of dialogue that summons up the teasing and disorienting uneasiness of a Hitchcock suspense film.

The first leg of this sprawling, hallucinatory show, part of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas, is a short tour of Lower Manhattan and Brooklyn that begins on a school bus at the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center on the Lower East Side. "Welcome to the New York of your mind," a guide says at the start of the trip. As Deborah Warner did in "The Angel Project" last summer, Mr. Fox uses New York as a set piece, but he has more of a blatant political agenda.

His New York is cluttered with a dense fog of history: a site where American Indians were massacred; an inconspicuous Brooklyn intersection where a prison faces a movie studio. The journey concludes under a highway in a warehouse in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, that could be a prime location for a midnight rave or, for that matter, plotting a conspiracy, but it is actually the headquarters of Mr. Fox's eight-year-old International Wow Company. The guide leads the audience up a narrow and somewhat pungent staircase and into a messy room full of furniture. There are no actors, but a handful of people in orange jumpsuits and hoods can be seen outside a window standing on the roof of a neighboring building as the sun starts to set. Two military men are keeping watch. This chilling image sets an ominous mood for a show in which some-

THE COMFORT AND SAFETY OF YOUR OWN HOME Death of Nations, Part 1 (U.S.A.)

Conceived and directed by Josh Fox. International WOW Company. Part of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas. Box office is in the lobby of the Clemente Soto Velez Cultural Center, 107 Suffolk Street, Lower East Side.



Photographs by Michael Nagle for The New York Times

"The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home" includes a bus tour.



Home invasion: a scene from Josh Fox's "Comfort and Safety," part of the Imagine festival.

thing scary always seems to be happening in the next room.

After walking down yet another stairwell, the audience squeezes into a cramped space where a man and a woman are watching television. This domestic scene quickly erupts into a nightmare when an arm pokes through a window to grab the woman. Guns poke through another window, while pulsating music adds an intense soundtrack. But after a few seconds of horror the attackers retreat

and the focus quickly shifts to a scene involving a platoon of soldiers on a military exercise in a neighboring hallway.

Mr. Fox does not stay with one vignette for long, transporting audiences to, among other places, a Guantanamo-style prison and a bustling indie film set. Members of the young and attractive ensemble create several stunning stage pictures with a few simple props. Mr. Fox's multitude of disconnected images can be too overwhelming to

process in one sitting. And for all its inventive stagecraft, the show carves an audience's patience with its pretentiously absurd dialogue and its length of about three- to three-and-a-half hours.

"Comfort and Safety," which runs this weekend and next starting at 7 p.m., is not for everyone. But in a theatrical landscape that often suffers from blandness and predictability, it is that rare show where you never know what will happen next.

Time Out New York

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Fall preview

DON'T MISS!



The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home

(Clemente Soto Véléz Cultural Center; see *Off-Off Broadway*) Domestic drama bleeds into international nightmare in Josh Fox's bracing coup de théâtre. Playgoers begin on a tour bus on the Lower East Side and end up in a Brooklyn inferno.

Reviews

The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home: DEATH OF NATIONS, Part 1

By Josh Fox. Dir. Fox. With ensemble cast. Clemente Soto Véléz Cultural Center (see *Off-Off Broadway*).

Director Josh Fox, prime mover behind the International

WOW Company (*The Bomb*), has a thing for guns onstage. And big explosions. And violence both psychological and physical. His penchant for cruelty might come off as callow if the work weren't executed by such committed young actors, or lightly salted with humor and whimsy. And so when a stockbroker (Robert Saietta) methodically guns down a roomful of co-workers in one nasty scene from *The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home*, the effect is both dreamy and disgusting.

WOW's latest show is a site-specific epic that transports the viewer, literally, to Brooklyn. Ticket holders board a schoolbus on Suffolk Street and ride across the Williamsburg Bridge toward the company's headquarters near Fort Greene. Along the way, cast



NATIVE SPEAKER In Pocahontas mode, Faryl Millet curses the Dutch.

member and tour guide Lucy Kendrick Smith narrates the sights, dryly limning the history of drunken rapaciousness and genocide that allowed the Dutch to buy Manhattan and subdue the natives. Once inside WOW's house, the action becomes a claustrophobic parade of trippy scenes in separate rooms, involving jittery National Guard trainees, ghostly Native Americans and terrorized detainees in orange jumpsuits. To provide a through-line, Fox has cast Najla Said as a young woman sucked into this surreal collage. By the end of the play, Said and Smith have exchanged a suicide bomber's corset of dynamite sticks. In this politicized and violent world, Fox seems to state, everybody's a walking time bomb.

—David Cote

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 THE NEW YORK THEATRE WIRE sm

NEW YORK THEATRE WIRE WRITERS CHOOSE 10 BEST SHOWS OF 2004-2005 SEASON

by Philippa Wehle

The New York Theatre Wire has once more asked its reviewers to choose their top ten shows seen between May 1, 2004 and May 1, 2005, on, Off and Off-off Broadway and to list them in order of importance. Their choices are based on artistic merit alone. Until recently we had required our writers to disqualify themselves if they hadn't seen a fair cross-section of the season's offerings. (The publisher always disqualifies himself *ex officio*). NYTW now has a system of "limited voting." If a reviewer votes for four candidates, for example, the top one receives a score of four, the second three, and so forth. This year, seven NYTW writers participated in the ballot and two of them chose the limited voting category. This year's "Top Ten" represents such a fascinating spread of shows (from new plays to revivals, from musicals to serious drama) that it was impossible to detect a trend. Of interest, however, is the fact that two of the shows in the top ten are "downtown" shows, one of which is by an important, emerging theater group, the International WOW Company, which is located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. It would seem that our reviewers are no longer limited to Manhattan theaters. Of course the exception has always been Brooklyn's BAM.

"Top Ten" Shows of the 2004-2005 Season

John Patrick Shanley's "Doubt" (originally at the Manhattan Theatre Club; moved to the Walter Kerr Theatre)

"Shockheaded Peter" (The Little Shubert Theatre)

Austin Pendleton's "Orson's Shadow" (Barrow Street Theatre)

Martin McDonagh's "The Pillowman" (The Booth Theatre)

Michael Frayn's "Democracy" (The Brooks Atkinson Theatre)

August Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean" (The Walter Kerr Theatre)

Terry Gilliam's and Hugh Vanstone's "Spamalot" (The Shubert Theatre)

Richard Foreman's "The Gods Are Pounding My Head" (aka Lumberjack Messiah) (The Ontological Theatre)

Tony Kushner's "Homebody/Kabul" (BAM Harvey Theater)

"In The Comfort and Safety Of Your Own Home," conceived and directed by Josh Fox, WOW International Theater Company, Williamsburg, Brooklyn



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Further information please contact: Philippa Wehle, author of this article, at: (212) 864-6642.

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Convention Draws Hundreds of Artists to City

by Alicia Zuckerman



NEW YORK, NY, August 28, 2004 — The conventional wisdom was that the city was going to clear out this week. But besides the thousands of delegates, protestors and journalists pouring into town for the Republican National Convention--writers, actors, dancers, musicians, and other artists are also seizing the moment. WNYC's Alicia Zuckerman reports.



AZ: They range from total unknowns to absolute superstars, and one of the things they have in common is that New York is their town. Even many artists who don't live here feel this way. Really during just about any given week, there are hundreds of films, concerts, plays, and exhibitions going on in the city. But this is unprecedented, says the playwright and director Josh Fox, one of the organizers of the group THAW Theaters Against War.

Josh Fox: As one of the people fielding the ideas // I heard of hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of protests that are // below the radar // it's incredible. I'm just gonna walk around because I think you're gonna run into things on the street.

AZ: Almost 200 of these events are happening under the umbrella of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas. Lauren Bacall, Richard Gere, and Kathleen Turner will be doing readings from the Constitution at Cooper Union.

Downtown, a big red megaphone called the Freedom of Expression National Monument is aimed directly at the courthouses. Anyone can climb up the ladder and yell anything. And it's not just Manhattan. A celebration of black and Latino freedom fighters in the Bronx is part-dance, part-poetry, and part-discussion.

The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home, a play by Josh Fox's theater company, International WOW, begins on a tour bus, which leaves from the Lower East Side.

Tour Guide: Every day this city is reborn, up here, between the ears today we are imagining a bit of our history history is a fantasy.

AZ: The tour ends up in the company's studio just outside the Brooklyn Navy Yard. The audience sits on the floor of a bedroom while a couple watches TV and prisoners in orange jump suits mill around on the roof, just outside the window.

Military reservists burst in with guns drawn.

Fox hopes the play, will raise questions about the impact of globalization, threats of terrorism, the war in Iraq, and what he calls the exploitation of September Eleventh. He says he's worried about what will happen if President Bush wins in November, but

Fox: OK, let's say Kerry wins--does everybody go back to sleep? You know what I mean?

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AZ: These are the kind of concerns that are driving so much of these events. The ideas are more complex than simply bashing President Bush, though there's certainly plenty of that, too.

The character Dickie Pillager in John Sayles' new film *Silver City* is based on George W. Bush when he ran for governor of Texas. But when Sayles shows clips from the film tonight at Symphony Space, he plans to raise issues that go beyond mocking the president and his environmental policies and corporate alliances. *Silver City* is as much about failures of the media.

Sayles: So much of what I see now on mainstream news, at its best if you have someone come on and tell the truth for 5 minutes, you have to get someone to come on and lie for 5 minutes, so that you feel balanced.

AZ: With so much politically-rooted entertainment going on this week, it's like the artists are having a convention of their own. Again, John Sayles.

Sayles: We have some real, deep reservations about the people who are gonna be crowned at this convention, so instead of walking around in the streets with placards, which has been done a million times we're gonna plow some of that energy into our art and just offer it up to everybody.

Beglarian: Simply the act of doing our work is a form of activism.

AZ: Composer Eve Beglarian co-created the music theater piece, *The Forgiveness Project*, about the hostility and resentment among Chinese, Japanese and Koreans that came out of World War Two.

Beglarian sees some parallels to what's happening in the world now. And she knows that sharing her ideas with people who think like she does won't do much to change the world. But, she says, getting art out there ... could.

Beglarian: One thing that comes up for me is the 9/11 commission one of the critical things they said was that the reason 9/11 could happen was because of a failure of imagination. Well artists are the experts at imagination. We're the people who inhabit the world of imagination, and we do have something to bring to the table we really do.

AZ: And to that end, Beglarian, a gay feminist composer from the left, wishes that as part of the week's activities, she could be on a panel with Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld. Or, at the very least-- that some of the delegates would spend some time with the artists this week.

For WNYC, I'm Alicia Zuckerman.

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Imagining a Different RNC

by Dan Bell

July 2004

Even while crammed into a booth in an 8th Avenue diner, Chris Wangro, between bites of his bagel and poached egg, gives good interview.

Wangro, executive co-producer of the Imagine Festival of Arts, Issues and Ideas, has had a lot of practice. Director of

the city's Parks and Recreation Department's special events for six and a half years, he has been in charge of a long list of unwieldy occasions, including the 1995 Papal Mass in Central Park and last fall's 100,000 person Freedom Ride Immigrant Rally.



Elephant illustration by Judy Rifka.

The Imagine Festival will open on August 28th at the Apollo Theater in Harlem. The weeklong coalition of more than 100 venues, artists and performers, is planned as a platform for the voices of New York's arts community during the clamor of the RNC. Wangro explains that the not-for-profit festival is intended as a "third space," an alternative to traditional left-right sound-bite politics. Instead of pushing a specific political agenda, the organizers hope to draw on New York's creativity to spur open discussion and fresh debate on the issues.

The idea for the Imagine Festival grew from a one-off event called "Arts on the High Wire" in 2002. Wangro was one of several producers involved in bringing together New York's arts community in support of the city's arts organizations that were badly hit by 9/11. "It was a time in which billions of dollars were being promised to New York by the government, but no money was being targeted for the not-for-profit organizations," says Wangro. "As many people did, we pulled ourselves together and did something."

The Imagine Festival began to take shape as soon as the organizers of Arts on the High Wire heard that the RNC would be coming to New York. Wangro recalls that "we saw it as an incredible opportunity to speak out from the cultural capital of this country. We decided to bring together the broadest cross-section of the New York arts community and provide a forum and place" for people to put forth their views.

Although he supports the rallies and marches that are planned for the RNC, Wangro is keen to emphasize that the Imagine festival has a different agenda. "The arts are traditionally about

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The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice-- Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts*--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

from print edition

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understanding and deciphering culture, framing questions and thinking on the issues," says Wangro. As a result, each of the festival's six days will feature a different theme—freedom, community, democracy, justice, prosperity and the future. Daily panel discussions that correspond to each of the themes will be held at The New School, CUNY, the Asia Society and in public libraries throughout the city. True to the spirit of open discussion, there are plans to host a debate on environmental issues between Friends of the Earth and members of Republican and corporate think tanks.

The festival will sponsor everything from opera to large-scale street theater in venues across the city that range from the Jewish Community Center to the Knitting Factory. Fringe acts will run alongside well-known names like comedian Margaret Cho and Marc Anthony Thompson of Chocolate Genius Inc., who bookend the festival at the Apollo Theater. Although the individual partners are members of the festival coalition, they will fund events from their own resources. How much the venues and performers decide to charge for events will remain at their own discretion.

If there is one overarching theme to the festival, it is an emphasis on communication. "The Comfort and Safety of Your Own Home," is an innovative Brooklyn-based project by Josh Fox and the International WOW Company that unpacks the cultural quicksand of America's communication overload. "The play is about how people are invaded through their television by a nation of fear and the sense that things are spiraling out of control," says Fox.

The site-specific performance is the first of a four-part play cycle, each of which focuses on a particular country—the USA, Thailand, Argentina, and Iraq. In this first installment the audience, limited to 30 people per night, will be shipped via tour bus over the Brooklyn Bridge, past the navy Yard, prison and newly built Steiner Studios, to the company's rehearsal space in which each room has another scene.

"Imagine you are channel surfing," Fox says. "You might see an image of Guantanamo Bay, a trailer for the latest blockbuster and an advert for a new kitchen unit. As we take the audience past the movie studios, a prison and residential homes, we'll show them that it's all right here in Brooklyn."

Once the audience is at their destination, they will find that the play is set next to a torture chamber. "Imagine sitting outside a prison cell in Abu Ghraib," says Fox. "It would be impossible to have a meaningful conversation; language is destroyed. The tendency of our brains is to normalize our experience, and if we don't stay awake we are capable of horrible things." By collapsing the physical distance between here and Iraq, Fox is trying to puncture the moral distance that cushions American audiences from the impact of televised images of war.

This is precisely the sort of complex message that is hard to convey at a protest rally. "People in this culture are trained not to think deeply," says Wangro. "We are trained to move quickly, to think quickly, to digest news and sound bites quickly. People need to stop and think."

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
Come to the Brooklyn Waterfront Festival.

Another festival contributor who needs time to distill his message is the Brooklyn-based literary performer Marshall Weber. Weber is known for undertaking marathon public readings of iconic texts, transforming books like James Joyce's *Ulysses* (36 hours) and the Bible (72 hours) into forms of meditation. His work is the antithesis of the sound-bite, a salve to the heartburn of the 24-hour news cycle.

For the Imagine Festival, Weber plans a non-stop reading of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* by Homer. He will read the *Iliad* beside the Vietnam War memorial in Water Street, when he's finished, he will get up and walk over to the Staten Island Ferry and start the *Odyssey*. "I try to read simply and unobtrusively," says Weber. "But I site the readings in contexts that create a multi-sensory experience."

Weber sees these classic myths as particularly appropriate for the current moment. "One is a book about war and the other is a book about a soldier trying to find his way home," he explains. Ultimately, Weber is "trying to create a really long-term historical context for this ethical dilemma when military culture gets out of control. The *Iliad* is about what happens when the soldierly myth of war as politics by other means is destroyed. The *Odyssey* is about the resonance of this for the rest of society—we are lost, how can we find our way home when we destroy not only our home, but our concept of it?"

Weber maintains that the readings slated for the week of the RNC are also about reclaiming public discourse. "Today we are used to associating public reading with authority—with the state, corporations and the church," he says. "Before the mass media, people talked in the commons, in the town square, on the soap box. For me, reading is about saying you don't need power and authority to engage in the discourse."

The Imagine festival's strategy of engaging venues and performance spaces not only provides space for this more meditative work, but it also sidesteps attempts by the city to quash dissent. If the city doesn't own the space, Bloomberg and company can't withhold a permit.

Wangro's former position as the city's director of special events gives him particular insight into the issue. "We knew right away that we weren't going to get the parks, that we're not going to get the streets," he says. "We wanted to be masters of our own forum, and we didn't want to expend all our energy fighting the city for spaces, so we went ahead and created a coalition of venues."

One festival piece that will occupy the streets, though, is "The Freedom of Expression Monument." Its title is suitably verbose—the monument is a giant, orange, 20-foot tall working megaphone. It will be set up in Foley Square and directed at the federal courts as part sculpture and part performance art. As people wander past, they will be able to climb a ramp up to the aperture and bellow a piece of their mind.

And, whether on stage or in the streets, in the words of Gunter Grass, "The job of a citizen is to keep your mouth open."

For more information on the Imagine Arts Festival, go to

www.imagine04.org

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