

READER

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Photo/B. Spector

some sort of undefined but horrible cataclysm overtakes the world.

Conduct, by contrast, focuses on the comparatively trivial case of Orlando—a Latin American military officer, a professional interrogator with a taste for torture, who starts bringing the office home with him.

Having discovered a poor girl on the street, Orlando abducts her and confines her in an empty attic somewhere, using her according to his infantile tastes. Before long, he's moved her to the basement of his own home—and then upstairs—where he deals with his wife's opposition with the same techniques he's learned to use on his political enemies: he trumps up a charge against her, and subjects her to a brutal interrogation. The wife, Leticia, ends up shooting him.

Horrible and full of implication as it is, this story ain't Armageddon. People don't break out in oozing sores here, as they do in *The Danube*. There are no mysterious snows, or flashes of light signifying extinction. There's only the case of Lieutenant Commander Orlando, who contracted a job-related moral disease that ate out his insides and ultimately killed him.

And yet *The Conduct of Life* comes across, even more powerfully than *The Danube*, as prophecy. As a statement on the end of things. It burns hotter and truer and meaner, and it leaves us less to wear.

Part of the difference is structural. *The Danube* draws its power from a gimmick: a wry, sharp, occasionally startling gimmick, according to which the gradual annihilation of everybody in the play is juxtaposed against the cheery banality of dialogue lifted from one of those learn-a-foreign-language records. "Unit Ten," the record announces. "Basic sentences." And there follows an elementary, half-comical discussion of

the weather. Only the weather is bad and the people discussing it are dying.

The gimmick's effective. But its effectiveness is of the sort that has us saying, *My God, what an effective gimmick!* We're impressed as much by the grandeur of the conceit as by its content, and being impressed excuses us—not entirely, but to some extent—from being overwhelmed.

The Conduct of Life provides no excuses. All its enormous craft is bent toward eliminating distractions. Toward isolating and displaying a brutal essence. In scene one we meet Orlando and hear him spout a sort of Nietzschean asceticism, founded on

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power, ruthlessness, and self-denial. In scene two we see him rage at Leticia. In scene three we watch him stalk and bring down Nena, the girl from the street. Click, click, click: each brief, bare encounter pushes us on through to the next step in Fornes's relentless dialectic.

And each step is full of a stunning, ridiculous pain. The very simplicity of Fornes's approach makes every gesture resonate just that much more intensely, like a scream in a warehouse. So that when Olimpia, Leticia's palsied housekeeper, offers a long speech detailing her morning routine, the litany's at once hilarious in its compulsiveness and astonishing in its bone-deep dignity. And when, late in the play, the nearly silent Nena speaks of

her humiliation, the paradoxical sense of absolute degradation and perfect victory in her words starts fires playing around your socks.

But the real heat in *Conduct* comes from Fornes's vision of a moral apocalypse as final, if not as quick, as the physical one in *The Danube*. A few weeks ago I wrote about the emergence of what I called Malignancy Plays: a rash, as it were, of new works describing a common syndrome. Malignancy Plays start with what might be called the Carrier—a character, invariably a man, who's leading a double life. In one life he's a fairly average guy with a home and family; in the other, he's pursuing some ugly, clandestine social obsession. He may be a Klansman, or a religious fanatic, or a government interrogator with blood on his hands. Somehow his ethical immune system's broken down; the evil of the world's infected him, become a malignancy inside him, and he's responding pathologically.

Inevitably, the malignancy takes control. The carrier brings his disease home and his family is destroyed.

The Conduct of Life is the Malignancy Play par excellence. Fornes understands modern evil like Louis Pasteur understood rabies. And she analyzes it with the same scientific calm—showing how it infests the class system, how it inhabits the cultural air we breathe.

Most of all, she understands what malignancy does to its secondary victims—to the wives like Leticia and the innocents like Nena. *Conduct* doesn't end with Orlando's death. If it did, it would be nothing more than a melodrama. No, *Conduct* goes on just a little further, exposing in a single devastating gesture the whole vast length and breadth and depth of the epidemic. The chances for survival.

Directed by Thomas Riccio, the

THE CONDUCT OF LIFE

Organic Theater

By Anthony Adler

The whole head is sick, / And the whole heart is faint. —Isaiah 1:5

Maria Irene Fornes has a way of knocking your socks off without removing your shoes. It's as if a fire had blown over you and burned the fabric away. You're just left standing there, stunned but rooted to the ground. You're in your shoes and your shoes are set in the ground, but suddenly you're naked. And all hell's breaking loose around you.

Burning air and solid ground.

That's Fornes

More specifically, that's Fornes's *The Conduct of Life*. Which is a masterpiece. I don't remember when I've seen anything so perfectly simple, so absolutely clear and solid and free of waste—so unassuming, in a way—and yet so harrowing. So terrible. This is an utterance in the manner of Isaiah. This is a vision of the end of days.

This is also a little surprising, since it's not *The Conduct of Life* but another Fornes play, *The Danube*, that concerns itself with apocalypse. Running in repertory with *Conduct* at the Organic Theater, *The Danube* gives us a literal end of days, chronicling the physical disintegration of two lovers and the people around them. as

Organic production is worthy of Fornes's vision. Riccio's simple, almost declamatory style offsets the horror of events and lets us see down to the disease itself. With set designer James C. Thurston and lighting designer Kenneth Moore, he's also created a *noir-ish* atmosphere that can scare your pants off when it wants.

Acting in a play like this has as much to do with emptying out a character—with becoming an image—as it does with filling it up. Carlos Sanz establishes an effectively empty fierceness as Orlando, which makes his bouts of childish panic all the more powerful. Anita Chadwaney's Nena has the bombed-out emptiness of the walking wounded.

Catherine Martineau, on the other hand, may be a little too empty for Leticia. Fornes offers a great many hints about Leticia's nature—her lack of education, her maternal relationship with her husband—but Martineau makes little apparent use of them. Her Leticia is competent but without weight.

Dorothy Milne's Olimpia, however, is rock solid. With her palsy, her speech defect, and her cantankerous humanity, Olimpia is a great opportunity for grandstanding. And Milne takes that opportunity. But she never forgets to ground her display in an authentic, palpable anger. This is no picturesque prole. This is hard being. And Milne's a marvel to watch. Like the play itself, she's all burning air and solid ground.

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