

By Barbara Osborn

SLOGANS LIKE "DON'T DIE OF ignorance" and the daily photo barrage of struggling AIDS patients are enough to wither the most stalwart libido. Pleasure, a word rarely heard anymore, has been lost behind the facade of seriousness essential to medical legitimacy and political approval in government-funded sex-education campaigns.

This new asceticism reduces sex to a few fearful acts and damages the gay community particularly. Not only is sex portrayed as risky business but the Helms Amendment insures that gay sex is not acknowledged in federal AIDS-education materials. So gay sex disappears while straight people scramble for the sexual and social safety of monogamous heterosexual unions. The celebration of sexual diversity and sexual pleasure that so often in the past ruptured social repression in the gay community disappears as well.

Beyond scare tactics: Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC), the largest AIDS service provider in New York City, recently released several film shorts in an attempt to put the sexual pleasure back in sex education. The *Safer Sex Shorts* are a collection of five erotic tapes that are both pro-sex and pro-safe-sex. Producers Jean Carlemusto and Gregg Bordowitz said the tapes were designed to "present options for making sex safer. We take a hard line—no pun intended—that one doesn't have to change one's behavior, only specific aspects of the behavior, to make sex safer. We advocate public sex as long as it's safer public sex."

The long and short of safer-sex shorts

Bordowitz contrasted their approach with the most familiar "Use a condom if you need to," "Stay away from people who use drugs," scare tactics. ("As if people who use drugs aren't our friends, our family, our lovers," Bordowitz remarks.) A 1987 GMHC study of the efficacy of various forms of safe-sex materials determined that explicit erotic films are more effective than other techniques in creating durable change in sexual practices.

Each *Safer Sex Short* runs about five minutes. They're designed to look like music videos and work like ads. Narrative situations are slight with virtually no dialogue. The tapes conclude with texts that reinforce the visuals.

Each tape is a sex celebration developed for a specific target group. In *Law and Order*, a black construction worker ties up a white man dressed in police leather. In *Car Service*, a businessman gets into a cab. The driver flirts with him. When they arrive at the destination, the executive can't find his wallet. Searching his pockets, he turns up condoms instead. The driver accepts and fucks his fare on the back seat. *Current Flow* opens on a woman with a vibrator. Her lover appears, unplugs the vibrator and goes down on her with a dental dam.

Mostly the tapes are like the porn you'd find in the video store down the street. The sexual heat gets

turned up with moans and groans, hip thrusts and tongue flicks—the conventional signs of lust and sex. *Current Flow* is delightfully noisy, and *Car Service* even manages to be amusing.

But these tapes aren't exactly what you'd find at the neighborhood porn house. For instance, there are no cum shots. It was easier for the

SEX ED

actors (some of them non-professionals) to pose and demonstrate than actually perform. In this respect Bordowitz likens the tapes to the posing films of the '50s. Another distinction is their multiracial casting. Video stores are full of far more extraordinary combinations, but what's remarkable about these vanilla-on-chocolate scenes is that they don't exploit difference. Neither black nor white actors are presented to the audience as exotic. Racial difference among the couples is taken for granted.

Avoiding relapses: Two porn theaters in New York City are currently showing the tapes before their feature presentations, and the producers are negotiating with porn distributors to use the tapes as trailers on VHS cassettes. GMHC also plans to use the tapes as part of their education and outreach programs to lesbian and gay groups and AIDS service organizations, including a

new education program, "Keep It Up," designed to prevent "relapses" (slipping back into unsafe sex practices) and foster lasting changes in sexual behavior.

At public screenings the tapes have aroused some, though surprisingly little, controversy among feminist anti-porn and gay activist groups. Page Mellish, president of Feminists Fighting Pornography, an anti-porn lobby, expressed disappointment at GMHC's decision to make use of conventional distributors.

"We are against the porn industry and against putting more money in their coffers. People think that gay and straight porn are separate industries, but they're not. They're the same companies. This project legitimizes the industry and makes them look like good guys," she said. In addition, a few members of the gay activist community singled out *Law and Order* for criticism because

Each tape is a sex celebration aimed at a specific target group.

of its aggressive and unromantic portrayal of gay sex.

On the other hand, Alisa Lebow, an educational producer at New York City's AIDS Discrimination Office, expressed support for the tapes for precisely the same reasons.

"The tapes are not normative," she says. "GMHC pushed the limits and crossed communities. They had to assess the potential to alienate

against the promise of reaching people who aren't usually included."

Douglas Crimp, editor of the recent book *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, suggests that the tapes' power stems in some sense from their very objectionableness to the people outside their target community. He contends that other educational efforts have been ineffective because of the tremendous ignorance about the gay community and its subcultures. For Crimp, the strength of the tapes is that they "empower the affected communities to represent themselves."

Aware of comparable efforts abroad, Chuck Fruchtey, educational director at the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, sees the tapes as a breakthrough for American AIDS efforts. Although some American gay porn producers now integrate depictions of safe sex into their scripts and didactic trailers have been added to some videotapes, GMHC's *Safer Sex Shorts* are a first in terms of letting hard-to-reach groups represent their own sex practices and eroticize them in a safe-sex context.

Bordowitz sums up GMHC's position saying, "It's impossible to institute behavior changes. All you can do is render options and picture possibilities. As long as people are engaging in a specific practice, we have a responsibility to show them how they can do it safer." GMHC's willingness to "picture possibilities," to eroticize, publicize, celebrate and educate is progressive—and not just in the struggle against AIDS. Seen in their broadest context, the tapes re-raise the slumbering question of sexual liberation. ■

Barbara Osborn is a writer living in New York.

Baal

By Bertolt Brecht
Directed by Robert Woodruff
Trinity Repertory Theater
Providence, R.I.

By Margaret Spillane

BAAL, THE EPONYMOUS ANTIHERO of Bertolt Brecht's first play, is a character who'll make you feel queasy with recognition, so unmistakable a member of the he-man bully brotherhood of 20th-century art makers is he. The opening scenes of the Trinity Rep's recent production of *Baal* could have been set in the Cedar Tavern circa 1953, with Jackson Pollock playing the lead. Baal is just the kind of dick-waving, drunk-as-a-skunk swashbuckler this era's art brokers like best.

Voracious appetite: While Baal believes it's his privilege to be a pungent, unwashed barfly, he likes his sexual victims "pure"—and plentiful. But purity is ephemeral—once touched, the pure woman becomes appalling and repulsive, a mound of suppurating flesh too vile to look upon, let alone touch.

A funny, fiery Baal and chain

In Robert Woodruff's production, Baal's voracious erotic appetite extends equally to men. These admirers are true believers, lured to Baal's altar for sacrifice after much ritual abuse. But after that first sacrament

THEATER

there is no other: should they come around later, his toy-boys get publicly flayed.

Baal demands that his lovers, male and female, understand that it's all for art: the flesh he mills and the gin he swills are just fuel demanded by the unquenchable poet-fires within. Indeed, with Mario Arrambide's corrosively commanding Baal, poetry is what intervenes whenever someone demands an explanation for a rape, a death, a treason.

At such moments Baal's voice al-

ters, becoming lyrical and priestly. He is speaking with the authority granted to him by another universe, one unknowable to those less enlightened, who feel too overawed to question its authority. But the hungry furnace demanding more bodies and more gin is not art but narcissism. As the play progresses, Baal's poetry becomes more and more perfunctory, a push-button gimmick to barter for the next drink. Soon he's a half-dressed second-string rock'n'roller in a flea-bag nightclub; he humps a doll onstage, then drives a microphone up his ass.

Diabolical good taste: The first act of Woodruff's *Baal* is a hilarious and terrifying climb up the volcano of 20th-century white male artist's privilege. That's clear from the very first scene. Mech, Baal's very own Medici, plies the young genius with eels and wine while Baal delivers the

thrill for which the mogul is shelling out the shekels: to be scathingly, sneeringly dismissed by the recipient of his corporate generosity. "Diabolical, but in good taste," intones Mech (William Damkoehler), looking like Daddy Warbucks in his shaved head and gleaming tux.

Scenes of bohemian couplings take place on a dark stage humorously illuminated by an open refrigerator. Two adolescent groupies in Catholic school uniforms wriggle out of their clothes just in time to be shooed from Baal's garret by his outraged landlady.

But the second act is about as rambling and unfocused as the drunken poet himself—and the fault lies far more with Brecht than with director Robert Woodruff. It produces the same feeling of anxious

The flesh he mills and the gin he swills are the fuel for the poet-fires within.

claustrophobia as being cornered by a real-life party drunk: the guy's in the grips of a lethal combination of booze and testosterone, and if he weren't so scary he'd bore you to death.

Woodruff lightens the burden of Brecht's monomaniacal irresolution with many comic visual touches, including cowboys dancing on stilts in Superfly trenchcoats and a priest whose bald head is tattooed with a pink crucifix. But it's a mighty long and wearying haul from intermission to the moment when Baal gets his final comeuppance as a band of lumberjacks shower him with spittle. Is Herr Brecht so sacred that he can't sustain a few well-deserved cuts?

Nonetheless, it's great to see the ever-audacious Trinity Rep being venturesome enough to stage this rarely attempted play. The questions *Baal* raises about the abuses of power by male artists and bourgeois society's endless ability to be titillated by such abuses, are reason enough to grapple with this work. *Baal* is less a great play than a great opportunity to open a dialogue. ■

Margaret Spillane is a critic living in New Haven, Conn.

IN THESE TIMES APRIL 11-17, 1990 21

Nicaragua

Continued from page 3

Chamorro officials have repeatedly promised that the new government will not attempt to "roll back" land reform. Officials have said they plan to compensate the former owners of confiscated properties with special bonds issued in a new currency. Such assurances have not assuaged wary Sandinista supporters, however, many of whom see UNO's assumption of power as a return to the Somocist past.

Attempting to head off this problem, the Sandinista-dominated national assembly has passed a series of laws to institutionalize changes made since the revolution. These include granting land titles to people now living in homes and on property taken from wealthy owners who fled Nicaragua during and after the 1979 revolution.

Another law grants immunity from prosecution for white-collar crimes that have been committed under the Sandinista government, including negligence or corruption in public ministries and businesses.

Although UNO can try to reverse some of these laws, such an action would provoke precisely the kind of confrontation top UNO advisers say they want to avoid in the name of reconciliation. The two top Chamorro advisers, former contra political director Alfredo Cesar and businessman Antonio Lacayo, are both moderate pragmatists who acknowledge that the Sandinistas wield considerable power and can, as President Daniel Ortega has often said, "govern from below."

A return to prosperity: A new political confrontation would also torpedo the new government's hopes to renew stability to spur economic recovery. The cornerstone of UNO's emergency plan is the gradual privatization of the economy, boosting production of basic goods by reducing state controls and bureaucracy.

To help accomplish this the incoming government hopes to lure exiled Nicaraguan businesspeople back to invest in the new economy. Recently a group of 80 business leaders returned to see what changes can be expected after April 25 and evaluate the future business climate.

Most members of the group lost their homes and businesses after the Sandinistas linked them to former dictator Anastasio Somoza. The current tenants of such confiscated homes include the nine top Sandinista commanders.

Encouraged by the UNO victory, the exiled business leaders say as many as 500 colleagues want to return at some point. They were less than enthusiastic, however, when Chamorro economic adviser Francisco Mayorga said the new administration would give them bonds to compensate for their losses.

"We don't want to repeat the error of the Somoza dictatorship, which concentrated the wealth in the hands of a minority, or that of the Sandinistas, where the nine coman-

ders held all the political power," Mayorga told the group. "We now have the opportunity to share Nicaragua's wealth with all social sectors."

Many of the business leaders questioned this approach, saying the confiscations were illegal and that by not evicting current tenants from the properties the government simply "legitimizes the law of the gun."

"A lot of people are now ready to come back, but unless they establish the rule of law there won't be a climate of confidence which will encourage people to invest," said Marcelo Lacayo, who lost his home and business after he left for Costa Rica. "Why not give the bonds to the people living in our homes? Make building a new home their

problem."

The gap between their interests and the stated intentions of the new government was readily apparent as Mayorga carefully pointed to the many changes that have occurred and what he called the "social problem" over the property issue.

In some places former owners have already returned to "take stock" of their former holdings. The question of property ownership will clearly be one of the trickiest the Chamorro government will have to maneuver after taking power. But it is only one of many that will confront Nicaragua as the country moves toward an uncertain future.

William Gasperini is *In These Times'* correspondent in Nicaragua.

C A L E N D A R

Use the Calendar to announce conferences, lectures, films, events, etc. The cost is **\$25.00 for one insertion, \$35.00 for two insertions and \$15.00 for each additional insert**, for copy of 50 words or less (additional words are 50¢ each). Payment must accompany your announcement, and should be sent to the attention of **ITT Calendar**.

NEW YORK April 11-27

THE NEW YORK MARXIST SCHOOL
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 11—Juliet Ucelli; Eurocentrism (first session of six-session study group); 8 p.m.; \$50.
THURSDAY, APRIL 12—Roderick Thurton; The Bureaucratic State and the Struggle for Socialism (first session of eight-session class); 6 p.m.; \$60.
John Garvey and Mitchel Cohen; New Forms of Control in American Education; 8 p.m.; \$5.
FRIDAY, APRIL 13—Stanley Aronowitz; The Prospects for Socialism, East and West; 7 p.m.; \$5.
SATURDAY, APRIL 14—The Communist Ensemble (concert); 8 p.m.; \$7.
SUNDAY, APRIL 15—Current Events Brunch Forum; 11 a.m.; \$3.
WEDNESDAY, APRIL 18—Anwar Shaikh; The Political Economy of the State in Capitalist Economies (first of two lectures); 8 p.m.; \$5.
THURSDAY, APRIL 19—Warsaw Ghetto Uprising 1943; Paget Henry, Roderick Thurton and Mitchel Cohen; C.L.R. James: Implications for Revolutionary Strategy Today; 7:30 p.m.; \$5.
FRIDAY, APRIL 20—Ludlow Massacre 1914; Susan Osborn; reading from her novel *Surviving the Wreck*; 7 p.m.; \$7.
SATURDAY, APRIL 21—Knots (concert); 8 p.m.; \$7.
MONDAY, APRIL 23—Phil Hill and Matthias Platzeck; East Germany Now; 8 p.m.; \$7.
THURSDAY, APRIL 26—Basir Mchawi and Sheila Collins; Combating Eurocentrism in Education; 8 p.m.; \$5.

FRIDAY, APRIL 27—Bernard Magubane, Jennifer Davie and Elombe Brath; Apartheid Forty Years After: A Crisis within a Crisis (dinner and discussion); 7 p.m.; \$15.

All events take place at the New York Marxist School, 79 Leonard St., New York, NY 10011, (212) 941-0332.

CHICAGO April 27-29

Racism and anti-Semitism is the focus of New Jewish Agenda's Midwest Regional Conference. Cornell West, Chairman of the Department of Afro-American Studies at Princeton University, will speak Friday evening, 7:30 p.m., on "Black/Jewish Relations." FREE and open to the public. Panelists include: Jane Ramsey Saltzman, Director of Jewish Council on Urban Affairs, formerly of the Harold Washington administration; Ron Daniels, coordinator of the African American Progressive Action Network and former Executive Director of the Rainbow Coalition; Cheryl Harris, National Co-chair of the National Conference of Black Lawyers. \$45.00 for the weekend (including meals) and \$25.00 for Saturday only. Ecumenical Institute, 4750 N. Sheridan Road.

May 4

32nd Annual Debs-Thomas-Harrington Dinner—honoring Arthur Loevy, secretary treasurer, Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. Featured speaker, Cecil Roberts, vice president, United Mine Workers of America, AFL-CIO: "Victory over Pittston—Lessons for the Progressive and Labor Movements." At the Midland Hotel, 172 W. Adams, 6 p.m. Tickets \$35, \$60 with message in program book. Contact Chicago DSA, 1608 N. Milwaukee, Chicago, IL 60647, (312) 384-0327.

May 5

"Building a DSA Agenda in the Heartland: A Conference on Organizing for the '90s." Sessions on '90s

Internationalism, Socialist-Feminism and Reproductive Rights, and Building the DSA Agenda. Workshops on Racism, Electoral Work, Labor Support, Campus Organizing, National Health. Registration: \$15, \$10 for students. Venue: Ida Noyes Hall, University of Chicago, 9 a.m. Contact Chicago DSA, 1608 N. Milwaukee Ave., Chicago, IL 60647, (312) 384-0327.

July 13-14

Pledge of Resistance National Convention, July 13-14, 1990; Chicago (De Paul University). Participate in setting the political priorities, program and overall direction of the Pledge of Resistance for 1991. Learn from/share with Central American activists from around the country; participate in workshops; hear well-respected speakers; be prepared for some fun! Call (202) 328-4040 or write National Pledge of Resistance, P.O. Box 53411-3411, Washington, DC 20009-3411.

SANTA CRUZ, CA April 27

"Democratic Socialism is Alive, Well and Growing in California," state conference of DSA. Topics include: Building Unity on the Left, Socialism and the New Europe, The Rainbow and the Democrats, Latino Voting Rights, Socialism and Racism, Dealing with Sexism, Skill-building and more. Contact your local DSA or (916) 361-9072.

LOVELAND, OH May 11-12

"Women of Vision in the '90s." Enter into a multigenerational, multiracial, multicultural process to evoke your capacity as a woman to connect the inner sources of life with commitments to self, others, the world and the Mystery which is their context. Dr. Carolyn Graton of the Institute for Formative Spirituality in Pittsburgh will begin an experimental and reflective process. For information, write or call Audrey Sorrento, Grailville Programs, 932 O'Bannonville Rd., Loveland, OH 45140, (513) 683-2340.

MEDFORD, MA June 4-9

Seventh Annual Management and Community Development Institute provides professional training for board, staff and volunteers of grass-roots organizations, human-service providers and community-development groups. Choose from 44 one-day and two-day courses covering: non-profit management, fundraising, community organizing and leadership development, community economic development, affordable housing, finance and community reinvestment. Learn with accomplished practitioners and experienced teachers from New England and across the United States. For more information contact: Lincoln Filene Center, Tufts University, Medford, MA 02155, (617) 381-3549.

WICHITA, KS June 22-24

Register now for Women's International League for Peace and Freedom Region II Biennial! For workshops and conversations with Mary Zepernick, president, U.S. Section WILPF; Sharon Asetoyer, Native American Women's Health Education Resource Center, Lake Andes, S.D.; Jamala Rogers, National Black Women's Health Project; Maaskelah, African-American Community Organizer; Anna Spradlin, Specialist in Conflict Resolution; Ardelle Hough, WILPF Region II observer to Nicaraguan elections; Billie Knighton, WILPF Region II representative to U.S.-Soviet women's meetings in Moscow. Special Appearances by: "Jane Addams," aka "United States' most dangerous woman"; Josie Wallenius, guerrilla theater from Toronto, Canada, and more! Men are welcome too! To register, write: Melanie Shurden, Registrar, WILPF Region II Biennial, 5206 Pembroke Circle, Wichita, KS 67220, or call (316) 687-5866.

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