

ANY REVIEW of a new repertory production ought to be an interim report. In a true rep company, a new production ought to be seen only as the first performance in a series that recurs and ripens through more than a single season and as only one example of a permanent ensemble's varied work. In neither way does it resemble the usual go-for-broke, one-shot production that makes it or not first crack out of the box.

This report is doubly interim, then, because of the above and because in this case the company itself is new. The BAM Theater Company—its name acronymically derived from its home, the Brooklyn Academy of Music—has taken a deep breath and dug in for the long haul, against the odds for rep success in the metropolitan area. Clearly its aim is to be what is possible only to repertory: a "living museum," fixed yet progressive, of plays worthy of remembrance. The artistic chief is David Jones, an associate director of the Royal Shakespeare Company in England, whom I've admired since his RSC production of Gorky's *Enemies* in 1971. At BAM Jones means to work with a stable group of actors, directors, designers, and others. His first season will include five productions, and two are now in repertory.

BAM opened with Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, directed by Jones. Some first bite. This late play is so steeped in artifices of romance that it calls for an audience almost as skilled in its conventions as the audience for Kabuki theater in Japan. The story can live only by mile-high suspensions of disbelief. Leontes, king of Sicilia, apparently happily married to Hermione, becomes murderously jealous of her amiability to their guest, Polixenes, king of Bohemia—so much so that Leontes puts his pregnant wife in prison and tries to have Polixenes killed. In prison Hermione gives birth to a daughter, and Leontes, suspecting the child's paternity, orders her abandoned to the elements. Hermione is reported dead. The daughter is secretly brought up in Bohemia as a shepherd's child, meets and loves Polixenes's son, is returned to her father. Her mother, who has really been hidden, is "restored" to life, and Leontes recovers reason and love.

With a considerable stretch, the symmetries and coincidences of the plot, like the notorious bear that kills off an old courtier conveniently, might be taken as



Murray, Maraden in *The Winter's Tale*; Dempsey, Jon Polito, Hart, Bayer in *Johnny on a Spot*.

part of the pastoral atmosphere, the way that comparable matters are accepted—even treasured—in the vastly superior *As You Like It*. But Leontes's ragings in the first two acts are so real and vile that they prepare *against* the light, fanciful matters that follow. Coleridge, contrasting Leontes with Othello, spoke of the Moor's "solemn agony" but of Leontes's "wretched fishing jealousies." Those jealousies are so fishy that they would be a shaky start for a tragedy, which indeed is what Victor Hugo called the play, shakier still for a romance.

What this comes down to in actual theater practice—never mind the literary value of Shakespeare's verse for the moment—is that, within a very few minutes, Leontes has to become scorchingly jealous without one wisp of convincing evidence, has to do it credibly if the play is not to collapse, yet has to stay within the bounds of our sympathy so that, when he recovers at the end, we can accept him back.

This opening comes off splendidly under Jones's hand. I should say, his ear: He is one of the rare Shakespeare directors today who believe that the theatrical life of the play lies in plumbing its language, not in imposing directorial concepts to make up for Shakespeare's deficiencies or to keep him up-to-date. That belief faces a particularly hard test in *The Winter's Tale*, and on that score Jones comes off well. In the ridiculously short time he has had to blend an ensemble as such, he has worked to center his company on principles of language-as-theater, and none has responded bet-

ter than Brian Murray, the Leontes.

I can't say that Murray's performance makes the evening: The show falters when it gets to Bohemia because of some weak actors and because of some of William's least funny writing for clowns. But before Bohemia, Murray, principally, makes the evening possible. He carves stature out of the air with voice and presence. A veteran of the RSC, Murray has been acting (and directing) in New York for several years, sometimes well and sometimes pallidly. Touched by Jones, he is a new, big actor, who gives us a lot to hope for.

Marti Maraden has lovely dignity as the wronged Hermione, and Sheila Allen (Mrs. Jones), as the queen's loyal friend, puts fine force into that loyalty. David Gropman's raked stage, on which Jones moves his actors with sharp economy, is pleasantly simple in Sicilia, but an abstract awning from a SoHo gallery somehow slips into Bohemia. Bruce Coughlin's music misses at the moment when Hermione's "statue" comes to life—a few feeble guitar plinks where some woodwind chords would have made wonder.

With the second play, John Lee Beatty's setting, visible at once because there is no curtain, announces a change of acting styles as well as place. It's a huge, wood-paneled anteroom of a Southern governor's office, with three sets of doors and an elevator. Whenever you see plentiful doors, especially swinging doors, prepare for bustle.

Johnny on a Spot is a farce by Charles MacArthur, co-author of *The Front Page*

and *Twentieth Century*. It was first done on Broadway in 1942, but not for long—four performances. I didn't know the play, but I was glad when I heard that Jones had chosen it, glad that he showed a healthy appetite for vulgarity, a recognition that some of Broadway's chromium-plated slam-bangers are among the best plays that America has produced (like it or not), and a refusal to take past failure as final judgment.

In proof MacArthur's play is torpid. It has a good farce idea: A governor, who is running for the Senate and is a shoo-in, dies on election eve; his body is hidden for 24 hours so that he can seem to have died of joy at the election results and the new governor can appoint a successor. But ideas are not plays. The structure of *Johnny* uses an OK formula, but the dialogue badly needs the florid, snarling humor of MacArthur's former collaborator, Ben Hecht. The basic dramaturgic principle here is money; the play reflects an era when actors came cheap. If your script sagged, you threw in more subplots with more actors, even cameo bits. You didn't strengthen the essence, you swelled the cast. This worked for George S. Kaufman more than once, but it doesn't help here. It just makes for more dialogue lying there, waiting for a joke man to come in and jazz it up.

The size of the cast makes revivals of this genre nearly impossible for any but a large resident company like BAM. Roxanne Hart and Gary Bayer, who have bits in the Shakespeare, play the leads here, the governor's aides, and they jog in and out a lot, trying to pump energy into the show. Hart in fact is more vocally vital than she was in the recent *Loose Ends*. (Incidentally, Bayer's role was done 38 years ago by Keenan Wynn.) Most of the others, except Jerome Dempsey as a likable old fuddler, do what actors do in plays with hordes of reporters and pols. Edward Cornell, an American, directed, and when MacArthur lets him, which is to say after the sluggish first act, Cornell gets the right surreal mania boiling on the stage.

So, interim report. Two differently dubious first choices, one of which will surely improve in performance, with the other presumably being phased out. Generally firm, stylistically apt direction for each. A company that has some promise of excellence, much promise of competence, and a few hopeless cases. With a little weeding and strengthening and, above all, with time in Jones's care, a possible company. Thus some reasonable reason to hope that the city which is the cultural center of the Western world may at last be getting a repertory theater of substance.

BAM's next plays: Gorky's *Barbarians* and Rachel Crothers's *He and She*. More later. —Stanley Kauffmann

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Ted Simon Jupiter's Travels

ALTHOUGH IT'S ABOUT 40 years too late to start complaining, I wish writers and directors would stop shoving Rorschach tests in front of musical comedy's blithe little head. For real shallowness, you can hardly top a musical that attempts to stop the show with psychological epiphanies instead of ballads and production numbers. Yet whenever someone decides that it's time for the musical to come of age, this impulse returns. Only the form changes, to suit the emotional fashion of the era. The Forties, thanks to *Oklahoma!*, were littered with dream sequences mating Freud with Terpsichore; *A Chorus Line*, in the Seventies, gave America the audition as group therapy.

Such shows were initially arresting, but those ego-id adagios ought to have started and ended with *Oklahoma!*, and there's only so much mileage in performers begging Tony-Award-shaped Purple Hearts for psychic travail suffered in the line of professional duty. The fiction that entertainers are by nature more sensitive, more in touch with themselves than the rest of us, is getting to be a trial. Besides, it's not their bruised souls that we came to applaud.

Michael Bennett's *A Chorus Line* won't reach the screen for a couple of years, but in the meantime we have *Fame* (MGM), directed by Alan Parker, of *Midnight Express* notoriety. *Fame* has a fresh premise and more polish and brio than any other movie musical in recent memory, but it eventually succumbs to a near-fatal case of *Chorus Line*-itis. A paean to the aspiring artists of New York's High School for the Performing Arts, *Fame* is at its best a kind of updated, inner-city *Babes in Arms*, reveling in the energy and ambitions of its youthful troupe.

The opening section, on the school's entrance auditions to sift out the deluded from the gifted, generates enormous good will. Unfortunately the vitality dissipates as the movie unreels. These early scenes, deftly segueing between all these would-be Makarovas, Perlmanes, and Brandos, make the intelligent observation that the line separating embryonic talent from full-blown chutzpa can be almost imperceptible to the naked eye. One example of this is provided by a nonchalant lass of Frigidaire proportions, who reenacts that unforgettable scene of O.J. Simpson waiting for an elevator in *The Towering Inferno*.



Irene Cara and Lee Curreri, turning the cafeteria into a chaotic dance hall.

Moving on to the freshman year, *Fame* starts spotlighting the tyros whose careers it will follow up to graduation. These include Ralph (Barry Miller), a cocky cutup whose martyred role model is the late Freddie Prinze; Coco (Irene Cara, the film's real comer), a brassy yet vulnerable singer; Montgomery (Paul McCrane), who thinks gay is a synonym for melancholic; Doris (Maureen Teefy), a shy, mama-dominated innocent from Flatbush; and Leroy (Gene Ray), a ghetto youth whose dancing is as explosive as his temper. Yet in Parker's hands, the edgy, claustrophobic excitement of the streets becomes the most vibrant character of all—bolstered by Michael Seresin's crisp camera work. As in the movie version of *Hair*, prismatic images and cutting-room hijinks almost upstage the flesh-and-blood performers, especially during the movie's big song-and-dance set pieces, a chaotic lunchroom chorale and a traffic-stopping boogie down West 46th Street. Still, you enjoy these montages only as long as they serve the cause of high spirits.

Unfortunately, Parker isn't content to let his tinsel fable alone—he wants to stun us with gritty pathology as well. In the second half of the film, Christopher Gore's increasingly maudlin script and Parker's taste for razzmatazz artifice make for a forced and synthetic combination. Each of the kids gets to deliver his own monologue of adolescent anguish, and the message is that life and art are indistinguishable. While telling his class that he is homosexual Mont-

gomery unburdens himself of such howlers as "gay used to be such a happy word."

Throughout, Montgomery is the homosexual equivalent of the characters Sidney Poitier played in those queasily liberal movies on race relations 15 years ago—a sexless saint who just wants to be understood. But then, so does the whiny Ralph, Montgomery's adversary turned chum and the barrio's own Pagliaccio. The director shamelessly wrings him for every last dollop of pathos. We're even treated to a Freddie Prinze riff, a pride-goeth-before gratuitous scene in which the camera follows Ralph's little sister as she toddles out of her tenement to meet up with God knows what horror at the hands of some pervert lurking beneath the stairs.

Meanwhile, the rapport between Leroy and a no-nonsense English teacher played by Anne Meara turns into *To Sir With Love* with the sexes and races reversed. You're supposed to swallow the notion that a rigorous institution like Performing Arts would persevere with a student who is not only subliterate, but also given to vandalizing the place whenever it threatens his cool. All of which is a model of plausibility compared to what *Fame* has in store for Coco. Although she's meant to be the savviest kid in the class, Coco gets lured into a phony screen test by a slimy type whose line wouldn't even have snowed Ralph's baby sister. When the camera gloms in for a closeup of Coco, stripped and sobbing, on the porno-maker's video machine, it's clear that this creep isn't the only one victimizing her. Coco's discomfort is also being exploited by *Fame*.

Still, you've got to have that big, rousing finale, and when you next see Coco, at graduation, she's beaming and unscathed, along with that girl who an hour before contemplated suicide because she'd been expelled from the dance department. (She's now been magically reinstated with a singing solo of her very own.) Of course, second-act heartbreak that dissolves into an upbeat finale is a musical comedy staple, but *Fame* is generally distasteful because it insists that this trumpery is the genuine article of human truth—that a reservoir of angst is needed to make a performer great. When it's being effervescent, *Fame* achieves something close to art, but the movie's flirtation with depth is just another show-biz gimmick.

—Stephen Harvey