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ARTS & CULTURE

The Danube

by **Tom Valeo**

February 18, 1988

THE DANUBE

Organic Theater Company

Real life, depicted in real time, would be unbearably tedious to watch. Small, trivial events consume the vast majority of our lives, but those events simply don't pack much dramatic wallop. Just imagine the last dinner party you attended being reproduced verbatim before an audience. That's why all plays are distortions of reality. They consist of dramatic highlights compressed into a brisk narrative creating the illusion of real life, but having little in common with the actual pace and tenor of real life.

In *The Danube*, however, Maria Irene Fornes wanted to depict small, trivial events. She wanted to make the audience feel their sweetness and simplicity. But how can a playwright depict mundane events without putting an audience to sleep?

The solution that Fornes found to this problem is ingenious, allowing her to have it both ways—she can present innocuous experience, but with enough poetry and suspense to keep the audience hanging on every lovely word.

She chose to mimic educational language records, which contain inane conversations designed to introduce simple vocabulary and grammar. The dialogue is so vapid it

often evokes laughter:

Mr. Sandor: Are you Hungarian?

Paul: Oh, no. I'm from the U.S.

Mr. Sandor: What is new in the U.S.?

Paul: The weather is bad.

Mr. Sandor: Is that so?

Paul: Yes, we have not had good weather.

Some of the lines are actually preceded by the recorded voice of a man reciting the sentence, first in Hungarian, then in English. This device calls attention to the vacuous content, making the conversation seem even more ridiculous.

But with this utterly simple language, Fornes creates vivid characters whose affection for each other is deeply touching. When their humdrum existence along the Danube River in Budapest is destroyed by a disaster, their suffering is indeed poignant and dramatic, even though nothing much actually “happens” in this play.

What does happen is this: Paul is introduced to Mr. Sandor's daughter Eve. They fall in love, and Paul decides to remain in Budapest instead of returning to the United States.

But from the moment Eve reveals her affection for Paul, their health begins to fail. She faints in a cafe. He has a horrifying seizure in bed. Eve's father develops ugly ulcers on his face, and they all become spastic and weak.

Fornes is deliberately ambiguous about the cause of their illness, but the dark goggles the characters wear suggest a nuclear explosion has occurred, a suggestion heightened in this production by a rumbling explosion and a background that becomes increasingly bleak and inhospitable. The disaster has made their environment literally sickening, and they appear to shrink and grow helpless. In one scene, the actors actually deliver their lines through small puppets that resemble them, making the characters seem even more vulnerable and ineffectual.

But this is not another blatant antinuclear statement. Most talk about nuclear catastrophe tends to focus on the Big Picture—megadeath, disease, the breakdown of civilized society. Fornes brilliantly brings the danger down to the personal level by depicting the painful disruption of life's simple joys. Like wounded animals, her characters try to go on with life, but that is impossible. The fallout is not only poisoning their bodies; even more dreadful, it is destroying their affection for each other. To die along with millions of other people would be terrible, of course, but to remain alive in a hopelessly polluted world, where people lack the energy and health they need to care about each other—that would be worse.

The cast members of the Organic production, under the perceptive direction of Blair Thomas, give plain, simple performances that are as elegant as the language they speak. As Paul, Steve Drukman is friendly and open—a true American. Drukman wisely avoids any hint of irony or condescension as he participates in the oppressively polite conversations. Jill Daly, in a masterful bit of underacting, deftly projects Eve's shyness as well as her passion. Randy Rakes is the embodiment of the jovial, carefree man as Eve's father, Mr. Sandor.

Only David Rommel displays eccentric traits. He needs them to distinguish the four characters he plays, but he puts a little too much spin on the ball. The Danube requires performances that are just like the dialogue—simple, straightforward, but wonderfully accurate.

Fornes was in town for rehearsals of *The Danube* and *The Conduct of Life*, which are running in repertory. While here, she conducted one of her controversial writing workshops in which she teaches participants how to get inside the minds of the

characters. (She will return to conduct another, May 23-27, sponsored by Blind Parrot Productions.)

Her technique, she says, produces characters that are vivid and true, and if the characters are vivid and true, they will lend coherence even to a loosely structured play.

The Danube certainly is loosely structured, but it's held together by characters whose emotional lives are easily accessible, even though they speak in the simplest manner imaginable. Fornes has not embedded a "message" in her play; she does not appeal to the intellect. Instead, she provides the audience with a visceral experience of love and loss, an experience that is deeply true to life, even though the play itself is far from realistic.



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