

THEATER REVIEW/*Irreverent poking at icons and such*

By Amei Wallach

The Spanish playwright Fernando Arrabal, who writes in French, has one of those askew views of the universe that make unbridled nonsense of life's more sacred—and profane—institutions. Writing in France in the 1950s, he became a grand old man of the avant-garde and the absurd. When his "The Architect and the Emperor of Assyria" was produced here a few years back, it was greeted with a great deal of puzzled enthusiasm.

"The Extravagant Triumph of Jesus Christ, Karl Marx and William Shakespeare," which opened Monday night at INTAR (420 W. 42nd St., Manhattan), is something else again. In true Arrabal form, it moons everything from leftist South American dictators, to the CIA, to Jesus Christ, to French intellectuals, by employing every scatological word in the book, enough bathroom humor to satisfy the most randy 4-year-old, and a medley of madcap sexual perversions.

But it is 1982 now, and all that frenetic icon-smashing seems a little more Mad-magazine adolescent than Ionesco avant-garde. Director Eduardo Manet, who is Cuban, hasn't helped matters much by staging "The Extravagant Triumph" like "Laugh-In," with windows that open and heads that poke out to deliver ridiculous one-liners. The message—which is anti-dictator, anti-church, anti-American, and pro-anarchy, pro-poetry and pro-sex in all its odder manifestations—gets rather lost in all the "Animal House" goings on.

Which does make for an enjoyable evening, let it be said. That is, if your taste runs to mistaken identities in which, in this case, a Ninotchka-like woman who prefers women falls for a male courtesan who dresses like an Arabian maiden from "A Thousand and One Nights" thinking he is a she, while he believes . . . Or the uptight minister of

interior, who pines to be tortured by the woman of his dreams, and plots with the CIA to help Communist governments take over the world.

As played by Thomas Kopache, Minister Ioga is particularly good, starting with one of the first scenes in the play. Discovered onstage is a bout-up Barcalounger with a red telephone at each arm where the gold lions would be on a more conventional throne. In the background, against fanciful palm trees, Naseer El-Kadi, as the male courtesan, is saying confusing and soulful things in a language that could be Arabic. Suddenly the phone rings. Kopache grabs it, learns it is the CIA, and pulls open a door, so he can sit on the toilet to take the call.

Ron Faber as Tallarin, the Fidel Castro-like character, has the voice and delivery of Jason Robards, a marvelously sloppy slapstick style and eyes that can bug and cross at the same time. He is irresistible at the end of the play when he reverts to infancy, with a white bonnet, a rattle and contented coos.

The production is chockablock with special effects, including a spangled serpent that serves sugar in its fangs and a visitor from the 85th century, played by Brian Rose in a *basso profundo* voice with the geniality of a visiting dentist, who arrives on a flying saucer dressed in a running suit. He is writing his thesis on "Madmen of the 20th Century" and has already visited Hitler and Franco on his way to Castro and Brezhnev—one clue that for Arrabal it is time to take aim at the left as well as the right.

But the main special effect in this production where voices count is Betty La Roe, as a revolutionary who thinks she is in rightest Chile when she has lost her way and landed in leftist Cuba. La Roe worked for a long time with Linda Mussman, who trains her actors to use their voices like a full orchestra, and La Roe does just that, which helps the sound effects profoundly and gives some indication that this could, perhaps, have been a truly experimental production and not merely what it is, an irreverent evening of laughs. //



Faber, top, and Kopache