

the village

VOICE

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You get a sense of just how dark some of Eduardo Manet's plays are when Ubu Rep's artistic director Françoise Kourilsky says she's chosen to stage the one in which a woman

goes crazy rather than the one in which a corpse is dug up and given a beauty makeover. The former is "more of a fun play," she explains, adding that of course both works are hilarious.

The humor in *Lady Strass*, at Ubu Rep from October 13 to 20, stems from something other than the mental disintegration of the title character. Like many of Manet's works, the drama is set in Latin America and depicts a clash in which cultural stereotypes are evoked only to be ridiculed. The drama features an elderly Englishwoman who defends what she views as the last outpost of the British

empire, her crumbling Victorian home, against two burglars. The invaders, a Frenchman and a Guatemalan, are soon swept away by the roles they as-

The Surreal Drama of Eduardo Manet at Ubu Rep

BY ANA PUGA

sume in their colonialist fantasies.

Lady Strass is part of an Ubu Rep series of works by Latin American playwrights who write in French, a path the 66-year-old Manet took almost 39 years ago as much by chance as by choice. In 1968, Manet enjoyed a successful career as playwright, novelist, filmmaker, and director of Cuba's national theater. But alarmed by the growing evidence that Fidel Castro was moving toward a dictatorship, and denied the opportunity to stage his macabre farce *The Nuns*, he left for France and exile.

"I arrived in Paris with my teenage son and no money, no job, no place to live," says Manet. "I was a bum, living in my friends' homes. But I have been lucky." As he spoke on the phone from Paris, Manet was between engagements to promote his eighth novel, *Cuban Rhapsody*, which has been nominated for the prestigious Prix Goncourt. His 17 plays have been staged in some of France's most estab-

lished theaters. *The Nuns* remains his best-known work and has been translated into 21 languages. Unfortunately, only a handful of his subsequent plays, and none of his novels, have been translated into English.

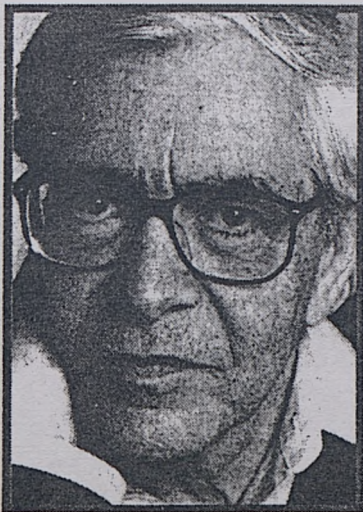
Part of the reason for Manet's limited appeal here may be the surreal nature of his drama. Characters in his plays often seem realistic at first, but that surface naturalism quickly explodes. His nuns turn out to be blasphemous, cigar-chomping men who murder. In *The Day Mary Shelley Met Charlotte Brontë*, the characters of Jane Eyre and Frankenstein demand upbeat sequels from their creators. *Lady Strass* does not recall her past in a misty-eyed flashback, she relives it with such intensity that it drives her mad.

As director Andre Ernotte works with the actors, he stresses the drama's humor "without turning the play into a freak show." "The two burglars," he says, "are both misfits and heroes. And *Lady Strass* is both incredibly lucid and shamelessly romantic. There is extravagance, but it is extravagance with a message."

Lady Strass follows her late husband's advice—"Here you are in your

house, in English territory; even if you are surrounded by savages, you are protected from all attack by the British flag. If some day life becomes too disillusioning, and the times too difficult, lock yourself in this protective tower and wait for the storm to pass." But the tower has become a trap.

Manet grew up thinking he was of upper-middle-class Spanish-Christian origin. But when he was 13 his mother suddenly revealed that her family had been Sephardic Jews. He now considers himself a nonpracticing Jew and credits his Judaism as the source of his dark sense of humor. While in his twenties, he studied in Europe but returned to Cuba in 1960, filled with leftist optimism about Castro's rule. After his disillusionment and exile, he headed up a group of intellectuals opposed to Castro. But he has since resigned from the group and now advocates lifting the U.S. economic embargo. He dreams of someday returning to Cuba, but only for a visit. Now a French citizen, he calls Paris home. Though memories fuel his work and torment some of his characters, they do not hamper him, he insists. "I live day by day, and never look back." ❖



JEAN FRANÇOIS DEROUBAIX

Eduardo Manet: "I take the reality and change it into poetry."