

# the village VOICE

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## Rue With a Difference

BY MARK GEVISSER

**OPHELIE SONG.** A play by Antoine Campo, music by Pascal Humbert, choreography by Clara Gibson Maxwell, presented by La Mama E.T.C. at the Annex Theater, 66 East 4th Street, 475-7710.

Alas, poor Ophelia! We don't know her well at all. Let your mind wander about the verbal monuments *Hamlet* has scattered all over our discourse and you'll find, among "Get thee to a nunnery!" and "Something's rotten . . ." not one hoary chestnut from Shakespeare's most sympathetic madwoman. "Poor Ophelia," writes Clara Gibson Maxwell (in the program notes) of the character she plays and choreographs: "Never was there one to attract such clichés and rancid romanticism. The reason for this is as beautiful as it is ironic: everyone seems to feel, somehow, that she speaks to them, though no one listens to what she says . . ."

That Bad Boy from Elsinore has been hogging the mike for too long now; this cool, Parisian "opéra minimal" is Ophelia's song. Polonius and Laertes (both played by Antoine Campo, who wrote and directed the production) fret and strut across the stage like overanxious backup singers, paternalistically devoting themselves to defending the honor of their daughter/sister. The Bad Boy himself (played by rock musician Nicolas Magat) is no longer lead vocalist, but a swaggering, sulky percussionist who throws temper tantrums by banging on his drums and overturning his cymbals, but who never really says anything. In an interesting turning of the Shakespearean tables, *Ophelia* has a ghost (played by Anne Fragonese), who at one point dangles a tiny portable cassette player from her finger—it emits a repetitive garble that, after a

few moments, unscrambles itself into "to be or not to be, zat is ze question." With the puffy-chested central dilemma of the male protagonist minimized to such squeaky insignificance, Denmark could become a place to explore the consciousness of the female victim left in its wake.

The play begins after Ophelia's death: on a stage littered with *Hamlet* paraphernalia (skulls, books, etc.), her ghost rises and dances a girlish hop, skip, and jump across the stage, throwing a disco glitterball up into the air and catching it as if she were in a playground. The ghost-girl freezes, and the mood changes sharply as Ophelia herself enters, doing airy arm-flailing interpretative dance. The women are joined onstage by Hamlet and Polonius, and they all wander minimally around the checkered stage (which is later raised to reveal a tapestry emblematic of Elsinore castle) to the warbling minimalistic feedback of Yovo M'Boueke's electric bass. Pink petals fall minimally from above. Suddenly, the music lurches into wildly exuberant disco and the auditorium is bathed, for a moment, in flashing light before Campo, playing Polonius as a commedia-inspired clown, throws colored confetti up into a spotlight and gulps down a glass of wine while Ophelia does wild hip-gyrations downstage. Hamlet and the ghost later spend a long time vacuuming up the petals and confetti: the relationships between the characters are very clear when they are enacting scenes Shakespeare wrote, but almost inexplicable when enacting scenes Campo wrote.

From the omniscient perspective of death and resurrection, Ophelia looks back at the story of her downfall. As the four characters reinterpret the Key Scenes (Polonius spying, Ophelia going

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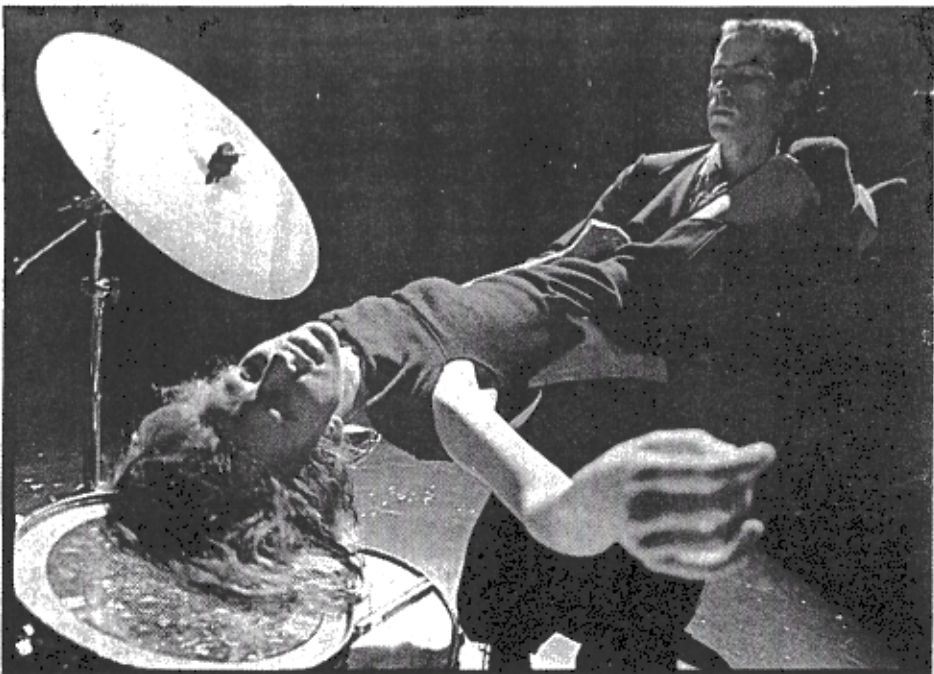
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crazy, Hamlet and Laertes fighting), Pascal Humbert's music goes through a series of utterly unexpected mutations: it flies into hyperdramatic French movie music; it reverberates with Pink Floydish rock synthesizers; it bursts into Elizabethan balladeering when Ophelia sings her song. The score is cleverest when it integrates the sounds produced by the performers on stage—as a *prise d'amour*, Hamlet holds Ophelia above the drumset and she leans back to punctuate her passion by basting the drums with her hair; it is dullest when it falls back into the atonal grunts of New Age-y minimalism.

Ophelia dominates the action of the performance with a circular, downward-lapping motion that climaxes with a beautiful final dance, naked, in a pool of light—as if she is being sucked, ever so slowly, into the whirlpool of her death. Her brother finds her and carries her corpse frantically across stage before laying her down, still naked, at the back of the stage, which is illuminated to reveal a woodpile. Here she lies while, in stereotypically male postures of bravado and swagger, Hamlet and Laertes spend the better part of 10 minutes beefing up for their final duel.

This is by no means the first attempt

to resurrect and reconstitute Ophelia—Bergman's *Hamlet* did it vividly. But Campo does mint a series of images that are fresh, amusing, and sometimes even startling. While Ophelia still does not have many memorable words (her only extended text, the song, is virtually incomprehensible beneath the rich, bewitched otherworldliness of Maxwell's singing voice), she is given remarkable physical articulation by the dancer's fluid body. But there is, unfortunately, as little inner motivation to be found in this expressionistic reconstruction of the character as there is in the few scenes Shakespeare originally gave her. We are offered one clue—an enigmatic soft-rock lyric that is repeated at various points through the piece, sung on a recorded voiceover track: "I wanna be your friend. Can I be your friend?" Is that what Ophelia has been trying to say to us all these centuries?

"What is it that Ophelia knows that no one wants to hear?" Maxwell asks in the program notes, implying that the receivers (rather than the transmitter) are faulty. It is difficult to hear the woman made mad by patriarchal abuse, but it's as difficult to portray her, and *Ophelia Song*, while bold and theatrical, goes no further in answering Maxwell's own question than Shakespeare himself did. ■



Ophelia Song: Does Ophelia just want to be your friend?

C. M. HARDT