

THE ATER

Ex Arcadia

Pastorale (HERE), Deborah Eisenberg's dawdling audit of '70s world-weariness, actually falls into the tradition of the antipastoral. Eisenberg's characters are not modern glosses on bucolic shepherds and shepherdesses, but a city-bred clan immune to the pleasures of the simple life. Dazzling, dotty Melanie (Alison Tatlock), a maelstrom in a peasant blouse, finds herself house-sitting somewhere quaint in New England. Joined by her friends Rachel (Maria Striar) and Steve (Robert Alexander Owens), each more neurotic than the other, the three set about a slow campaign to destroy themselves and their digs through a program of drugs, drink, sex, and rampant overanalysis. Each character's voice emerges nicely, as Eisenberg has a fine ear and a subtle command of the ennui and frivolity of '70s-style slackerdom. She's also mastered the one-liner, as when Steve, describing the Sturm und Drang among his roommates, deadpans, "It's just so Teutonic over there." Eisenberg is best known as a writer of short stories and her one failing lies in her desire to create closure for her characters, to supply direction to a work that best succeeds as a portrait of aimlessness. A strained coda in which the principals, about to be banished from the Eden of their rent-free home, climb to the top of a hill and bask in the beauty of nature, rings ineluctably false. Director Pam MacKinnon steers the entertainment with a deft hand, keeping the pace swift and coaxing strong performances from her actors. While *Pastorale* may not offer sheepshearing festivals or maypole dances, it does provide a pleasant enough idyll amidst the tumult of Downtown theater. —ALEXIS SOLOSKI

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Director **Jim Simpson**, who grew up in a Nisei neighborhood in Hawaii and loved Samurai and Kung-Fu movies as a kid, is fulfilling a ten-year-old dream with his production of *Benten Kozo* -- a "TriBeCa Kabuki." Written in 1862 by Kawatake Mokuami, the son of a pawnbroker who witnessed the seedier side of life, the "gangster play" involves five "charismatic criminals" who actually "steal the play and try to make it about themselves." In Simpson's staging, there are eleven big "Oriental-style" fight scenes performed by twenty-two of the Bat Theater troupe's young, athletic men and women; the costumes reflect the punk look in contemporary Japanese "anime" cartoons.



Pastorale

Clubbed Thumb has come up with another quality production. *Pastorale* is an off-beat play intelligently penned by short-story writer **Deborah Eisenberg** and directed by the excellent **Pam MacKinnon**. The "darkly comic" one-act is a year-long look at a group of ten college friends, each struggling with adulthood. Then they get together in semi-rural New England to challenge their old relationships. The three main characters include Melanie, who makes promises she can't keep; Steve, who wonders if "empty gestures" constitute "real life"; and Rachel, played by **Maria Striar**, who drops acid and talks about "singing food." "Rachel is always trying to figure it out, but she has an oblique mind," explains Striar. "She inevitably gets somewhere, but it's not where most people would usually get."

SIGHTLINES



Armless and the Man: Meg MacCary and Steven Rattazzi in *Freakshow*

Circus Catch

Amalia, a woman with no arms or legs, perches atop her pedestal, a coy smile playing upon her face. "You are wondering," she purrs, "if I've ever had sexual intercourse."

Playwright Carson Kreitzer gets *Freakshow* (HERE) off to a ripping start. She plunges the audience immediately into the intrigues of a turn-of-the-century sideshow—tales of freaks born and made, of the genuine article and gaff, of the "shame of exhibition" and the terrible need to be seen. She sketches the liaisons among Amalia; her muck-covered lover Matthew; the idiot Pinhead; Aquaboy, the human salamander; the Girl, a pert runaway; Judith, the dog-faced woman; and Mr. Flip, the operation's unctuous barker, promoter, and paterfamilias.

Kreitzer can create complex characters, such as the lordly, dirty-talking Amalia, and write tender, clever dialogue—as when the runaway goes to kiss the begilled, beguiled Aquaboy, and he warns her, quite sadly, "I don't turn into a prince." Her faults lie in her plotting and structure. Kreitzer introduces conflicts, but their resolutions do not advance the drama. She gives the work a playful, episodic form, but finds no way to bring it to a satisfying end.

Happily, Pam Mackinnon's brisk, sympathetic direction and the skills of the ensemble do much to excuse the script's flaws and celebrate its strengths. While all the performances impress, standouts include Lisa Rothe as Judith, Meg MacCary as Amalia, and the marvelous Steven Rattazzi as Mr. Flip—the actor never shies away from Mr. Flip's nastier qualities, yet succeeds in making him lucid, almost likable. Even in the case of this insidious showman, Kreitzer proves herself an author of exceptional compassion, everywhere revealing the humanity behind apparent monstrosity. —ALEXIS SOLOSKI

THEATER CHOICES

FREAKSHOW: Part of Clubbed Thumb's SummerWorks '99, Carson Kreitzer's play dispays the secrets and intrigues of a troupe of early-20th-century sideshow performers. Though the milieu isn't new, Kreitzer demonstrates a knack for elucidating the individuals inside the freaks. Meg Mac-

Cary shines as Amalia, the prettiest torso in many a county, as does Steven Rattazzi as Mr. Flip. **HERE**, 145 Sixth Ave, 802-8007, through Sun. (Soloski) c

DOWNWINDERS: Playwright Erin Courtney, a staple of Clubbed Thumb's SummerWorks for several years running, returns with this story of a family caught up in '50s weapon tests. Will this fission fizz or fizzle? Starring *Henry Fool's* James Urbaniak. Directed by James Hannaham. **HERE**, 145 Sixth Ave, 213-802-8007, opens Thu, through Sat. (Soloski) c

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the village

