

Erotica: Delta of Venus

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November 12, 1987

Prop Thtr

I just wanna get people horny. --Karen Goodman, director of Erotica.

Maybe you've noticed them, the five or six in Chicago, located for some reason near government buildings--one by the State Street police headquarters, another by Cook County Jail, a third just a couple of blocks from the Circuit Court building on LaSalle: storefronts painted in bright colors, with lots of lights and names like "Little Bo-Peep," "Puss 'n Boots," and "Fantasy World." Advertising "nude dancers"--"live"--"onstage"--"seen from private booths."

Inside, there's a row of doors; you enter one, put a Susan B. Anthony (!) dollar in the slot, and wait for the curtain to rise over a pane of glass. Through the pane, sure enough, you see a nude dancer, live, onstage, swaying and showing you her various parts. In some detail.

The private booth, the glass partition: emblems for sex in the Age of AIDS. Danger makes for new enthusiasms, if not strange bedfellows. Denied the possibility of touch, we gorge ourselves at the eyes. And denial itself becomes exciting. It's prohibition as titillation--an almost nostalgic sense of the forbidden.

Of course, the forbidden doesn't have to be quite as ugly or blatant or brutal as the private booth merchants make it. Karen Goodman and Charles Mueller set out to devise a more elegant form of prurience. They took several stories from Anais Nin's upscale erotic collection, Delta of Venus, and put them onstage, live--an evening of illicit passions and strange tastes, without the sticky floors.

Still, the basic appeal's the same. Written for a private client in the 1940s, Nin's stories of fetishists and whores, leering priests and overly playful papas generated sexual heat by rubbing up against widely accepted, and judicially enforced, moral conventions. Simply writing them down was a clandestine, and therefore erotic, act. Over the years, however (thanks in part to Nin's friend, Henry Miller), the conventions came apart. Sexual discourse became freer, and the stories themselves became publishable--a sure sign of their diminished force. If somebody'd staged these pieces ten years ago, audiences--theater audiences especially--would've considered them quaint.

But now we have the bio-morality of AIDS to keep us honest. Or at least repressed. It's our private booth and glass partition. I defy anybody to sit through Nin's vignette about Bijou and the sexy Basque, or the one about the beautiful woman with a taste for strangers, without considering the foolhardiness of such behavior under the present circumstances. And consequently, its attractiveness as fantasy.

Reviving Nin's stories at just this epidemiological juncture was a brilliant--er--stroke. Unfortunately, it's the only bit of brilliance associated with this production. You might say Goodman and Mueller muffed their chance.

Mueller's script is self-consciously, awkwardly, at times almost incomprehensibly poetic. The opening sections in particular--when we meet Kiki Huygelen's Nin, who introduces us in turn to our first obsessives--habitually lapse into picturesque gibberish. Nin's anonymous patron paid her a dollar a page and asked her to leave out the poetry. He may have been misguided in his literary judgment, but he had sound theatrical instincts. An excess of overwrought imagery and pseudocosmopolitan philosophy chokes *Erotica*.

But much more debilitating than Mueller's language is director Goodman's inability to control tone or manifest subtleties. Eroticism's an emotionally delicate and precise business. It encompasses an enormous range of feelings and moods, from the grotesque to the innocent, from the savage to the hilarious. It demands absolute seriousness and irony, absolute mystery and clarity. All at once. Under Goodman's direction, *Erotica* runs--quickly and without stopping--from false sophistication to farce. And there it stays until very nearly the last minute, when Nin's little fable about two men and a glass partition redeems it a bit, by forcing us to acknowledge the overwhelming physical immediacy of sex even in the context of a prank. For just one second, Goodman shows us the marvelous paradox of the erotic. Then it's gone.

Which, I suppose, can be taken as a lesson about sex in general.

Goodman and Mueller get only spotty help from their cast. And in one instance they're the victims of outright sabotage--the saboteur being Christopher Nibbio, who is without question the crudest, most selfish actor I've ever seen on a stage. Liza Minnelli in a one-woman show couldn't be more of a hog than Nibbio, who's willing to subvert an entire scene for the sake of a caricature that doesn't even make contextual sense.

Andy Roski, on the other hand, has an intriguingly brazen presence as an exhibitionist named Fred. I also liked Kiki Huygelen's low-slung style and game willingness to attempt a French accent in the name of--how you say eet?--l'amour.