
July 29, 1996, Monday

THEATER REVIEW;Enter The Queen, The King, Whoever, Bald and In a Caftan

By VINCENT CANBY

Phaedra" is the title of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company's very bizarre and risky new production, which opened last night at the Theater for the New City, but Everett Quinton, the star and adapter of the piece, takes his time easing the audience back to ancient Greece. It's almost as if he were avoiding the evening's moment of truth.

The moment is, in fact, about 45 minutes, the main body of the play, during which Mr. Quinton, wearing a voluminous caftan of army-surplus camouflage cloth, his head as bald as Erich von Stroheim's, holds the stage and acts up a primeval cataclysm all by himself. He appears not only as Phaedra, the queen destroyed by her "incestuous" love for her stepson Hippolytus, but also as Hippolytus, her husband Theseus and every other character in this first great love triangle in the drama of the Western world.

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While Mr. Quinton bounces around the stage as if in a pinball machine, camp is carried to the outer edge of sanity. The star works himself up to the passionate pitch of an ancient Hollywood fever dream. The iconography of pop cinema is everywhere evident. By turns he's womanly, manly, priggish and grand. He pleads, he threatens, he swoons, he astonishes. But is he funny? Not immediately, only when you later remember his manic dedication to his roles and some of the lines he has written for himself. You can't be disappointed when Oenone, Phaedra's nurse, begs her suicidal mistress: "Prolong the taper of your life, O Queen."

Or, consider Phaedra as she tells Hippolytus, "This country is not big enough for the both of us." The cadences are familiar but they don't recall either Euripides or Racine. They sound as if they had been inspired by a speech spoken by Leo Gorcey, the Dead End Kid, as he tells off a rival: "Dis block ain't

big enough for de bote uvus."

Mr. Quinton, adventurous artist that he is, plays it straight. He creates a heroine who has the tragic dimensions of Joan Crawford in "Humoresque," though he never allows his loyal downtown fans the catharsis through the laughs they have come to expect. His is a breathtaking and stern performance by a fearless actor on his own wavelength.

As if to prepare the audience for what's to come, he provides "Phaedra" with a prologue, which, though limp, is at least familiar in comic tone. Mr. Quinton first enters wearing a miniskirt of the same camouflage cloth in which he's later swathed, and a black wig (talk about big hair!) that looks very Japanese, possibly borrowed from "Madama Butterfly."

He's a sassy Italian waitress in a Greek diner who agrees to help a schoolboy assigned to read and report on "Phaedra." There's also some jokey audience-participation byplay in which the waitress coaches the rest of us on how to keen in the manner of a noisily lamenting Greek chorus.

It's only then that the houselights go down and we're plunged into the emotional maelstrom that consumes Phaedra, Hippolytus, the other characters and, very nearly, the star, leaving some members of the audience utterly bewildered. Though "Phaedra" is a one-man show, it's not a one-man production. Bill Nobes is the director.

It's said that all great comic actors long to play Hamlet, but not Mr. Quinton. At least there have been no signs to date of a Hamlet in his future. Instead, he has been tackling the theater's great women's roles with the ferocity of a Minotaur. Most recently he starred as Carmen in a mercilessly funny deconstruction of Bizet's "Carmen," and then took on Tosca in his own backhanded tribute, titled "Call Me Sarah Bernhardt." Admittedly we saw him only briefly as Tosca, and at a slight remove from the character: he played her as she might have been played by his fictional heroine, Mimi London, a New York con artist passing herself off as Bernhardt for a 1906 Omaha engagement.

The masquerades are never simple in any Quinton performance. They're as complex and surprising as the man who adopts them.

"Phaedra" is playing four performances a week: Thursdays through Saturdays at 8 P.M. and Sundays at 7 P.M. PHAEDRA

A one-person show performed and adapted by Everett Quinton; directed by Bill Nobes; percussion and sound, Michael Van Meter; lighting by Cordelia Aitkin; costumes by Larry McLeon; wigs and makeup, Zsamira Ronquillo; sets by Rue Catorz; stage manager, Flavine. Presented by the Ridiculous Theatrical Company, Mr. Quinton, artistic director; Adele Bove, managing director. At the Theater for the New City, 155 First Avenue, at 10th Street, East Village.