

JOHN LAHR'S INTRODUCTION TO THE GROVE PRESS EDITION

“ FATHER UXBRIDGE WANTS TO MARRY” is a talented, difficult play that takes Gagliano into new dramatic terrain and away from the naturalism of his well-received “Night Of The Dunce.”

His play is conceived in that nether world which mixes moment and memory, speech and lingering sounds.

The hero of Gagliano's tale is a beleaguered simpleton named Morden who struggles to get outside himself.

Morden is not merely vulnerable, he is punished by experience. His head rings with Bach oratorios, and the fragmented frequencies of electronic music which deny the inherited sense of cosmic coherence.

Morden has no skills; he has no keen intelligence. He is plagued with both guilt and hatred for a world that never stands still long enough for comprehension. He would kill Debden, the woman he loves, rather than lose her; he would destroy the priests of the Church to whom he comes for guidance, only to find that they are becoming “modern.” Conscious of sinning, yet continually betrayed by the world, he envisions himself at the Crucifixion, not as the Roman nailing Christ to the cross, but as the blunt pounding of hammer meeting nail.

When the play opens, Morden is running an elevator and being informed by the landlady that he is being replaced by an Otis Automatic. “There's an Otis in the Vatican” she tells him. The elevator stalls, the landlady, stuffing herself with candies, begins to choke. Morden's life flashes in front of him in this allegory of heaven and hell. He yearns for transcendence; “as if a great mouth was at the bottom of the shaft, and it was blowing this cage with such force that it took no effort at all to smash me right on through the roof. . .”

To this drooping knight of faith, his work, like his religious alternatives, do not have the thrill of free choice. Father Uxbridge reminds him “Either/Or. Push or manipulate, Morden.”

Morden cannot make Kierkegaard's leap, not, at least, in the twentieth century. Gagliano's vision of the clergy is hilarious and almost too strong for the play's intentions. Uxbridge, the old guard, explains his Billy Graham rhetoric this way: "Things are changing. did you know, Morden, that jazz has been allowed in the Mass? and a Catholic priest recently addressed the Masons? Why, if this keeps up, one of these days I may even have to address the Jesuits (Crosses himself)." Uxbridge goes on to confess "The murderous soul. That's my shtick."

Morden receives the buffets of the new, swinging priesthood from Father Ongar who replaces the fire and brimstone of Uxbridge. Ongar gives a hippie sermon that burlesques the attempts to decorate old, un-firm foundations with gaudy exteriors: "My brethren. Michelangelo Buonarotti, that clever wop fairy, painted a vision of the last judgment in which some of humanity, surprised --but not too put out, for after all, they had it made -- are allowing themselves to be hoisted up to a glorious heaven in the arms of muscular angels. . .We'll annihilate the past -- for we've got to find our own way to his cruelty -- by going on a psychedelic trip. I, leading the way, of course. I'll put red velvet on all the walls and everyone in their Sunday froufrou will float, fapitzt, in a blue-green haze"

Gagliano's ability to make language memorable (Morden speaks of his aged mother whining ("like a car idling") is part of this craftsmanship. Uxbridge has a dark humor; the names of his characters are all taken from stops on the London underground -- suggesting a subterranean world as well as a joke. Morden never goes through the roof. God -- the Angel of Death -- is as silent as the mute little girl called Angel whom Morden wants to adopt.

Gagliano's vision is a complex one — even galling at times — but at every point in the play, we are conscious of a craftsman, testing his talent in a society which is not interested in long, hard looks at serious questions."

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