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## Red Tide Blooming

By Martin Denton

■■■ More stuff happens after this, all of it equally bizarre; Olokun does eventually make it to the island, where a ritual sacrifice takes place and then (I think) civilization reaches some sort of apocalyptic climax. As I said, it's complicated.

But it's also spellbinding and, more important, insanely thought-provoking. Mac's intellectual range here is astonishing: reasoned attacks on conformity bounce against rants on media-saturated culture and the egoism engendered by modern technology; comments on the decline of political theatre sit side-by-side with radical political commentary. Recent events are interpreted as biblical omens, the hypocrisy of monied commercial interests is exposed, and Lynn Cheney sings a song about how she's in love with Saddam Hussein.

What's most exciting about Red Tide Blooming for me, though, is not the content but the form. Mac has created a genuinely subversive musical, turning the traditional values of the genre upside-down and inside-out, substituting Ludlam-esque/Ludlam-inspired Ridiculousness for the book and broad, raunchy burlesque-inspired routines for musical numbers. This is a show that isn't afraid to sing songs about sex organs or to show them uninhibitedly; this is a show featuring a chorus line of mermaids, one of whom is clearly male and another of whom is delighted to lose the seashells that are her only adornments from the waist up. Somehow, it's rude without being vulgar, and it's entertaining without being mindless. And it's spectacularly consistent, and of a piece, throughout.

The Clubland scene is a little masterpiece all by itself, capturing the ugly decadence of complacent American life circa 2006 in a manner as compelling and terrifying as Brecht and Weill must have managed when they unveiled their Threepenny Opera in Weimar Berlin. You can't look away from it, even though you're recoiling on the inside, because you're utterly enthralled by it.

Red Tide Blooming jolts us with lightning here, reminding us what theatre can do at its honest and uncompromising best. Mac's breathless staging is beautifully complimented by Julie Atlas Muz's splendid choreography, which is dazzlingly professional even when it knows it's being silly. The design is simple but effective, featuring expert lighting by Garin Marschall; a colorful set consisting principally of faux-Coney Island-style posters, created by Derrick Little; and an eclectic mix of appropriately garish costumes, makeup, and hairdos by Steven Melendez. Basil Twist has provided some off-the-wall puppets and Stephanie Wells and Daniel Reyes Llinas offer live musical accompaniment on piano and guitar.

The company, mostly downtown alternative burlesque performers, is terrific. Mac himself plays Okolun in a star turn that is nevertheless pretty temperate for most of the show. (There's a too-long sequence at the end in which Mac and the other actors shed their characters to become themselves which prolongs the piece without accomplishing anything new.) Others in the company include Bridget Everett as the tough-minded Lynn, Todd D'Amour as Colin Clement, Bianca Leigh as the formidable Constance Faubourg, and Playhouse of the Ridiculous veteran Ruby Lynn Reyner, bringing gutsy verisimilitude to the role of Slavaskia. The chorus (mermaid and otherwise) is comprised of James Tigger! Ferguson, Laryssa Husiak, Stacey Karpen, Linda "Dirty" Martini, Steven Menendez, Suzi Takahashi, and Layard Thompson.

Red Tide Blooming is not for everybody, and most likely the people who would be most alarmed and shaken up by it will never see it. But that doesn't mean that they shouldn't. Mac's show is a triumphant leap ahead for musicals, or at least a leap off to one side, anyway: in its rigorously uncompromising frankness, it stands as one of the most original and challenging works of this or recent theatre seasons.

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