

ROVER ARTS

When Pictures Give Blood

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The Baroness and the Pig by Michael Mackenzie

Directed by Catherine Bourgeois

Imago Theatre May 6 – 18, 2008

Reviewed by Marianne Ackerman



Plays written for audiences steeped in the aesthetics of film are unfathomably rare. *The Baroness and the Pig* is such a play. An episodic narrative structure unfolds through a series of tableaux during which one actor strikes painterly poses while the other rolls in invisible mud so convincingly you can almost smell it.

Leni Parker is the Baroness, a corseted 19th-century matron who undertakes to train a wild child for domestic service, hoping success will amaze her friends and restore the social status she lost to gossip over a philandering husband. Ms. Parker's obliging noble begins as a cartoon character, and elicits much laughter from early scenes. Natalie Claude as the reluctant pupil also plays it broad, soothing anxiety by curling up in the foetal position, rubbing her crotch as if tormented by a fierce itch. Scenes of instruction are driven by clever word-play, Pygmalion stripped of Shaw's verbiage.

The meandering rhythm of Michael Mackenzie's script leaves plenty of time for an audience member to wonder about everything he doesn't tell us: exactly how was this child raised by pigs? Since the setting is France, presumably they were those stubby, dark *sangliers* who run in family herds, get drunk on fermented fruit and taste so good soaked in wine. But how was she discovered? And what about the poor Baroness? Has she thought of taking a lover?

Just when it seems the play is only ever going to be about actorly antics and elliptical, one-sided conversations about aesthetics, comes a brilliant pivot. In perfect unison, the two actors reach for gravitas and it all makes sense.

Rifts on social themes like class, body image and domestic bondage could easily be wrung from *The Baroness and the Pig*, but the Imago production reveals this play is mainly about the forging of a relationship based on identification and filled with tenderness. How an over-civilised matron gets in touch with her animal urges, and a wild child learns to wear shoes while remaining true to the laws of the wilderness, including loyalty to the leader of the pack.

The actors are excellent, and very ably directed by Catherine Bourgeois, associate director of Imago Theatre. It would be so easy to go so wrong with this ethereal text, and she doesn't ever. The set by Jasmine Catudal, costumes by Louis Hudon and soundscape by Peter Cerone offer just the right post-modern mix to serve a filmic script, hints of history without a whiff of dust.

Montreal playwright and film writer Michael Mackenzie has waited 15 years to see his play produced in English, although it has been widely staged in translation, including Hungarian, Portuguese, German, Hebrew, Czech and French. A worthwhile wait, to say the least.

Continues through May 18 at Theatre La Chapelle, 3700 St. Dominique. Tickets \$16 and \$20. Box office: 514-843-7738.