

*A new experience for Burton audience*

# The Open Theatre – theatre in the making

By SANDRA SOUCHOTTE

It is appropriate that the Open Theatre of New York should have chosen a piece called, "The Mutation Show", to shake-up the consciousness of the near-capacity audience at Burton Auditorium Friday night. For this is theatre in the making; a metamorphosis of the absurd, and the dark seeded with the structure of dance and ritualistic incantation, and yet open to the progress of new creation.

Joseph Chaikin's theatre, founded in the early 60's, has built its reputation on improvisatory production and a combination of writer-director-actor roles. Each performance remains open to new interpretation and technique, although all the members of the company have become so professionally attuned to each other, that the looseness of the basic idea is off-set by an impression of tight control, and a practised inter-relationship of action.

Theatre is returned partially to pantomime, but also, pushed forward to a less rigid structure which builds upon free movement and insinuation of meaning. Using grunts, gasps, bird-like warbles, repetitive gestures and sometimes words, the troupe creates a rhythm of life, both innocent and terrifying.

The company emerges one by one from behind a curtain strung over a rope, a device both unpretentious and informal, but one which reminds us of theatre in its primitive origins – perhaps even the Medieval Morality play. The unofficial master of ceremonies, Shami Chaikin, in-

roduces us to the strange conglomerate of child-like, animal-like, people-like characters who play-out their fantasies for us. Her menagerie includes the Bird-Lady, the Mano-Who-Hits-Himself, the Man-Who-Smiles, the Thinker and the Petrified Man. She is both ring-master of the circus and participant in the game which becomes real.

The themes which are worked through, attain a sequence which can be related to the cycle from birth to death, or the cycle from an unrepressed primitive state to that of the immobile, programed social animal. This fusion of meaning remains secondary to the movement of bodies and the vibrancy of sounds and gestures which coalesce in patterns of form on the stage. Stereotype, abusive and comic fragments of reality are swept up by an incantatory beat or the rhythm of a song such as "Oh, How We Danced On The Night We Were Wed". Its traditional banality is remade into a framework for the dance of all the other false mates and destructive incongruities of life. As the performance continues, a fluidity settles over the cacophonous sounds and separate gesticulations of the stage. The meaning, like the production itself, which is in a state of mutation, remains intuitive and in the process of definition.

One of the nicest things about the performance at Burton was that the audience seemed to be completely receptive to this idea and completely responsive to a theatre which opened out from itself in a new definition of language and action.



Two of the members of the Open Theatre of New York perform in The Mutation Show.



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