



REVIEW: *Double Feature*

San Francisco Guide (www.authentic-sf.com), April 23, 2008

Getting there, though, was easy enough. I went to the Marina District and followed the clanking masts of the docked sailboats until they ended at the base of the historic Fort Mason Center. Passing through the old military gates, I walked between rows of warehouses that stretched to the bay.

It felt as if I'd entered a time warp. For more than a hundred years these buildings served as an Army post. Everything from the red tiled roofs to the small square windows looked just as it did when they were built in 1910, still all lined up in military precision and conformity. The insides, though, have been radically transformed. Now instead of housing helmets and cannons, the warehouses are home to dozens of non-profits, including the legendary BATS Improv.

Entering the historic building, I eschewed the elevator and went up the cold, wide staircase. I soon found myself traversing a series of hallways and overpasses that looked identical to the ones I'd just left.

I wasn't the only misplaced patron of the arts. Another man asked me where the Blue Bear School of Music was, still another whistled a Rod Stewart chorus as he peered into one of the galleries. It was beautiful to discover that the austere hallways led to so many expressions of art- here a gallery, there a theatre. It was like breaking open a hive and discovering that each pod, which seemed so identical from the outside, actually held not honey, sticky and uniform, but a series of unique and vibrant nectars.

Eventually I found the lobby and entered the small theatre. Nearly all the 200 seats were filled. The audience hummed in muted conversation, waiting. The tiny stage held only two chairs and a small black platform. Off

to the side stood a simple keyboard. Such humble settings belied how far and how vigorously we would all travel that night.

Opening the guide I was thrilled to find out that the performance starred my favorite actors: Gerri Lawlor, Regina Saisi, Tim Orr and Rafe Chase. Each month, BATS highlights one of a dozen formats, from improvised musicals to Olympic style theatre sports. To my delight, that night's improv was not only a long format, but an original Rafe Chase invention: the double feature. This meant four actors, one musician, and one light technician would create two original feature length stories. Simultaneously.

The actors came to the stage and asked us for names of our favorite movies. After much hearty shouting: Jaws! Xanadu! Ratatouille! tonight's double feature is decided: Babylon Desire and The Writer. These few hectic minutes on the stage were the only time the actors deliberated the sense and structure of the stories. From then on, they had to wing it. Live.

Within minutes the actors were flinging us from a gentile lawn party to the swirling steppes of some far off planet. The stage was austere, but between the actors' body language, the creative lighting, and the brilliant sounds improvised by Joshua Raoul Brody, it was easy to sit back and be flung along.

In fact it was invigorating as, without any warning, the story line careened from one tale to another. Although there were only four actors, they found themselves portraying a cast of at least 528.

It was soon apparent what a game it can be for the actors to spring these scene changes on one another. The more awkward, the better. The crowd adored this challenge, roaring with each predicament, each outrageous solution.

My favorite collision of the scenes happened when the actors crammed into their space pod. It was tight and awkward and I don't know how four grown adults- squeezed into two straight backed chairs, tipped upside down and backwards- kept from laughing out loud. It seemed that we in the audience

gasped all the harder for witnessing the actors' need for restraint.

Chase eventually exited the pod, but the others were too entangled to extricate themselves. He left the scene and immediately turned on his heels, stalked towards the cast and confronted them in his other character, that of the British writer.

Hands on hips, Chase looked on the entangled forms and demanded to know what his butler was doing in the pantry with those two women. The audience shouted in astonished laughter as Orr's character morphed from steadfast warrior into sheepish manservant.

I won't be giving away any of the myriad plot twists when I reveal that Lawlor gave birth to 500 babies in her cramped space pod and that these same babies attacked and devoured Saisi, her traitorous captain. Oh yeah, and Chase, who fathered the small army, was a mega-beast warrior boasting two penises. As for the British period piece- the shy writer did find true love with the girl who had an unnatural fascination with monkeys.

Well, okay, I spoiled this double feature. But the beauty of BATS Improv is that you'll never see anything like it ever again. Each creation unfolds for that night only. It's a complex, well-crafted story. And it's completely, hysterically, outrageous.

For those who've never experience a night of BATS Improv, just imagine your favorite jazz ensemble, saxophones and trombones belting out original solos, an ascending call and response that deliver the listener further and deeper into the stratosphere. Only with improv, the ether consists of equal parts inspiration and laughing gas.

For two full hours it's there and then it's gone. You're left only with aching cheeks and the sense of giddiness that comes from experiencing fearlessness.