

Synergic Theater Sometimes Astounding

A Theater Review

By ELIZABETH LEE

The word is out. The fool is (temporarily) on top of his mountain, but others down below no longer keep hidden the private matters of their world and themselves.

In a polished production of dance, sound, visuals and the spoken word, Synergic Theater returned to the East Coast after four years in San Francisco. In its performance Friday night in Reynolds Theater at Duke University's Bryan Center, the troupe was amusing, provocative and sometimes astounding. It performs again tonight at 8:15.

In Richard Haisma's *Letter III of the Maximus Poems*, I wanted to close my eyes and just listen. Haisma's declamatory talents are considerable; he rolled the words into the air like music. They deserved the full attention of the ears and the imagination. Haisma's poses got in the way of the pictures that would have evolved from the evocative images in the poem.

I had the opposite problem in David Manning's *The Fool* (1979). Dancers, exchanging masks, clinging to one another, and dangling from a tangle of vines, created pleasant illustrations for the narrative. A huge, beautiful, golden mountain rose and billowed. I wanted to see more

of these and turn off the talking voice. I got bored. Yet later, I heard an audience member tell Manning with great enthusiasm, "*The Fool* was my favorite piece."

I suspect that she was raised on TV, where the experience of absorbing ideas is always attached to visual paraphernalia. I grew up with books. So when words are the medium, I like to imagine what's being described. A good text is fine by itself and illustrations can never substitute for a bad one.

Haisma's *Terra Incognita Belief Map* (1982) needed no words and defies their use in describing it here. This work revealed his artistry as a dancer and magic maker. Mysterious and mesmerizing, the terrain he created was inhabited by simple things made unfamiliar by juxtaposition. He became a strange contorted figure against the ordinary chatter of a restaurant full of diners or a portrait of people carved in stone. Sudder revelations of different perspectives continued to surface as Haisma turned and shaped his body against the sounds and pictures of his world.

Discarnate Landscape (1981) is charming and light. Here Manning's wit and Suzanne White Manning's grace combine in a series of images evoking the San Francisco Bay area. Lovely sailboats glide in gentle waters. A painter

sees the world as his material, even takes real people off the streets to turn them into art.

Private Lives is a brilliant work. With no special effects at all, using the simplest gestures—a woman lowers her head, a man steps hesitantly toward her—Ms. Manning exposes to public view the nuances of feelings

among two men and two women. Danced with beautiful subtlety by Ann Deloria, Marjorie Scheer, Jack Arnold and Bryce Wagner, to music by Gershwin, the work is like a string of pearls. Each moment is rich with meaning, unique, yet in fine relationship to a whole which is clearer than any words.