

Feral Flying

Michael Feingold

Dec 17, 1996

Juan Darien

By Julie Taymor and Elliot Goldenthal
Vivian Beaumont Theater
Lincoln Center
239-6200

Fruit Cocktail

By Tim Miller
P.S. 122
150 First Avenue
477-5288

Every piece of theater, to some extent, deals with *Juan Darien's* subject: humans' struggle with their animal instincts. Earlier centuries applauded when the human, rational, calming principle won out; it was left to our over-civilized era to see things the other way round, much as Freud had predicted in *Civilization and Its Discontents*: Too much stultifying social organism reveals rationality as the savage oppressor, instinct as a soothing, healthy restorative. Not that nature isn't violent, but it never destroys without leaving the seeds of new creation behind, instead of dumping fish-killing pesticides into the rivers, or inventing machines that deplete the ozone layer. And it maintains a relative degree of civility among the species: They may devour each other, but not to the point of extermination, and only in the search for food do they try anything that amounts to the aggressive modification of other animals' behavior, a habit that otherwise belongs strictly to us sapient bipedals.

The hero of *Juan Darien* is an animal that learns just how nasty bipedal behavior modification can get, a jaguar cub magically transformed into a human boy by mutual need: The hunter who shot the cu's mother is tracking him; a human mother who's just lost her son to a plague hides him at her breast. The foster mother is the only human who genuinely loves Juan; when she dies too, the cub-boy, persecuted by his teacher and schoolmates, seeks solace in a touring carnival, where the tiger tamer, scenting his animal nature, exposes it to the town, which tortures the boy till he reverts to jaguardom. He's rescued by his own kind, who kill the tiger tamer; his human awareness lasts just long enough for him to add his own name to the marker over his foster mother's grave before vanishing into the jungle.

This ominous fable, based on a short story by the Uruguayan writer Horacio Quiroga, is clearly a Christ story in reverse, the assumption of a human spirit into the instinctual sublimity of animal flesh. Its epigraph might be Giraudoux's mordant comment in *Ondine*, "*Mais l'homme a voulu son ame a soi; il a morcele stupidement l'ame generale.*" Belonging to the world's soul, Juan the jaguar is fine back home in the jungle; it's we humans, feeling out of place on earth, who put him to acting unnaturally. Life among the "lower" animals, however violent, is at least void of the vindictiveness that creates things like the giant fire-wheel on which the town tortures Juan. Our species' only redeeming wait is a mother's love.

If this sounds grim, it's certainly not so in the telling: Julie Taymor and Elliott Goldenthal, who first adapted Quiroga's story for the stage a decade ago, subtitle their version "A Carnival Mass," and that oxymoronic description is perfectly apt. Goldenthal's divinely raucous circuscumsalsa band music, which underscores almost every moment, takes most of its text from the Requiem, suffusing the story with the sense that human life is a sinful agony, one that might reasonably drive a boy who understands his nature to seek peace of mind among the quadrupeds. But what a show we repellent bipeds make: Taymor's vision of humanity is a seething festival of grotesques, employing every mask and puppet device from tiny tabletop figures to enormous carnival bigheads-shrieking, scheming, luring, betraying, boozing, lying, seducing, and persecuting. Through it all, a jaunty, bowler-hatted skeleton, like the death figures in Mexican folk art, struts his way in and out of the action, a joyous reminder of the natural fact human beings least enjoy facing.

Every moment of *Juan Darien* is one of astonishing, exhilarating joy. Taymor uses the discrepancy between animate and inanimate objects as a sly running comment on the tale's discrepancy between man and beast. From the moment a vast canopy of green foliage descends on the Beaumont stage, releasing a flock of invisibly piloted butterflies, her magic keeps finding another way to say that life is more unexpected, more complex than we think it. Her awards for artistic bravery are already too numerous to count; let's give her one for renewed clarity of storytelling. On the Beaumont's big scale, a few of *Juan Darien*'s passing details have gotten blurred or faded—the tabletop village with its tiny funeral procession was much more fun when you knew those sitting at the back of the house shared your joy in it—but the piece as a whole seems, if anything, stronger in form and clearer in narrative than it did when it began its career of enchantment. And this time around, Taymor's work is strengthened by one great addition: Daniel Hodd's performance as Juan. A boy soprano with the Met Children's Chorus, Hodd is also a child actor of spontaneity and presence. His intensity brings the story a pathos it never had before: The human race deserves this endearing child; it's not fair for him to revert to jaguardom. But children grow up, and men are beasts, and that's reality. I think, like Walt Whitman, I should like to live among the animals—or maybe among the puppets. At least as Taymor invents them, their life seems so much more meaningful than ours—and far less dishonestly manipulated.

Or maybe one should just yearn to go, like Goethe, to the land where the citrus trees bloom. Do you know it? I do; it's in Tim Miller's heart—a lovely, sunshiny place to vacation for 90 minutes. In Miller's heart, which he lays bare for us (along with his charming body) in his latest solo piece, *Fruit Cocktail*, he is always under the orange tree in his parents' backyard in Whittier, California, just turning 18 and about to experience same-sex intercourse for the first time—in a candlelit dance studio, to the accompaniment of Handel's *Messiah*.

Clearly, Miller is an incurable romantic, for whom homoerotics are always a step on the road to soul-fulfilling ecstasis. Tragic experiences, political, social, or viral, are tossed aside with a grin. In this piece he gives his version of the gay male writers

obligatory scene, *Telling Your Parents*; it passes with a whimper and an admonition not to forget to take the garbage out. If only everyone's life could be as joyous as Tim Miller's-it probably would be, if we would all look at things in his funny, bright, leapingly outrageous way. Innumerable teenage boys have worried about the slowness with which their pubic hair was coming in, but only Tim Miller gets visitations from "the pubic-hair oracle," telling him how full of adventure his queer future will be.

But then, everything in Tim Miller's life, as he performs it, is an adventure. Who needs to be angst-ridden about the drama of coming out to your parents? Driving from Whittier to Fullerton is drama; being given an apple sapling to plant by your first-grade teacher is drama; noticing the soft hairs on the arms of a classmate at age 12 is drama. Under such circumstances, coming to orgasm with a man for the first time; with or without Handel, is practically Wagner's *Ring*.

As his title indicates, Miller's metaphor, like Miss Prism's, is drawn from fruit: Instincts grow in people, fighting their way out against the tough seed casing of social hostility; they burst into bloom, and a fruit is born. The apple sapling, the toothpicked avocado pit in junior high, sinister experiments with mother's zucchini in the vegetable patch, and finally that orange tree, to which he confides his 18-year-old thoughts, all work their way into his anecdotes.

And like many romantic artists, Miller has a hidden crafty component, stringing these and all his other references together, so that the metaphor itself will bear fruit, helping to nurture and heal a "gay" community that more often occupies itself with the sad side of homosex. Miller exists to teach the world, by gracious indirection, that, like the orange whose juice he squeezes over his naked body, things that seem bitter can be sweet at the same time-not to mention nutritious, like the pulp he greedily crams into his mouth and lets drip from his chin. Let others deal in gloomy fictions; his, you might say, is a happy world of pulp fact.

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