Approved For Release 2006/11/27 : CIA-RDP88-01365R000300060032-6

NEW YORK TIMES
28 NOV 1972

Stage: 'Politics of Heroin'

Satire Marks 'Dragon Lady's Revenge'

By MEL GUSSOW

Political theater often sacrifices art for the sake of politics, but this is not the case with the San Francisco Mime Troupe. It is clear from "The Dragon Lady's Revenge," a scathing musical cartoon (with dialogue), that the Mime Troupe is a superb ensemble of theatrical artists, polemicists and satirists. "The Dragon Lady" opened this weekend at the Washington Square Methodist Church, where it will run through Dec. 10.

This is a simplified (which is not to say, untrue) modern immorality play about "the politics of heroin in southeast Asia," and for documentation the handbill program directs us to Alfred McCoy's book by that name.

"The Dragon Lady" treats the drug trade as Hollywood Oriental movies treated the white-slave trade, except that "The Dragon Lady" is intentionally comic. The spoof is indebted perhaps equally to Josef von Sternberg's "Shanghai Gesture," "Fu Manchu," and daily newspaper headlines. It is played in a style somewhat like that of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company.

There are intrigues within intrigues, forked - tongue triple-dealers, spies spy on spies, and a spiraling plot that never loses sight of its tale. Everyone is a dissembler, but it is the Westerners who are most inscrutable, particularly those representing the Counter Insurgency Agency (abbreviate that at your own peril). Not just the Americans, but the British, French and Vietnamese are maliciously indicted. There are also jabs at an array of cure-alls, from methadone to missionaries.

The action sifts from the American ambassador's mansion to the nefarious White Monkey Bar to the streets and sewer of Long Pinh, a city in which hypodermic needles as well as pistols serve as weapons. Watch out for that stranger in cassock an dsneakers, brandishing a cruci-fix, which he keeps jabbing into the arm of the hero, the ambassador's son (Ed Levy), until he is turned into a doddering, glassy-eyed sleepwalker.

In command of the White Monkey is the Dragon Lady (Andrea Snow), a slinky Gene Tierney in blue backless gown, very amusingly exuding nastiness as well as sensuality. In charge of the country, or so he thinks, is General Rong Q, who is played by Sharon Lockwood with nervous, jerky movements like an old newsreel version of Mussolini. The meddlesome ambassador promises the general the presidency for life. How? "Through free and democratic elections," answers the ambassador matter-of-factly.

There are also Tim Drooley (Michael Christensen), the malevolent omni-agent; Tran Dog, the wily servant; Blossom, the sharp-eyed B-girl. These caricatures duck in and out of alliances (one motto: "The enemy of my enemy is my ally for now") and face insant death and sometimes sudden rescue.

The devious melodrama is played to the tune of a tinny neo-Weill score, plinked by a combo that varies in number from three to six. The script, music and staging are not individually credited. Collectively, this is a singular effort.

"The Dragon Lady" is presented on a tiny stage with curtains for scenery and hurried costume changes in partial view of the audience. The Washington Square church is not an ideal location. The acoustics are uneven, the space lacks intimacy, and sight-lines are difficult, but none of this matters in the slightest. The play scores its serious points with antic humor. Laughter and provocation combine to form essential political theater.

The Cast

THE DRAGON LADY'S REVENGE, a musical. Written, directed, designed, composed, built, costumes, staged, painted, publicized, produced and performed by the San Francisco Mime Troupe. At Washington Square Methodist Church, 133 West Fourth Street. WITH: Larry Pisani, Ed Levy, Michael Christensen, Daniel Chumley, Jason Harris, Sharon Lockwood, Melody James and Andrea Snow.

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