

ALOÏSE'S THEATER: "THE PRICE OF MADNESS"

BY
KERRY EIELSON



photo by Ian Tong

"The Price of Madness," a new play by Catherine Filloux opens January 30 at the Intar Theater on theater row.

"Art brut artists create their works for their own use, as a kind of private theater. They choose subjects which are often enigmatic and they do not care about the good opinion of others, even keeping their works secret." Michel Thévoz, in introduction to catalogue of La Collection de l'Art Brut, Lausanne, Switzerland.

In "The Price of Madness", Catherine Filloux, a Franco-American playwright, explores the conflict of interest between the art world and the impetus to create. The conflict is embodied by the play's central characters; Aloïse, a character drawn from the real-life schizophrenic outsider artist who worked from an asylum in Lausanne in the middle of this century, Henri, her fictional nephew, an artist who has sold out and can no longer create for himself or others, and Paul, his French art dealer.

Like Aloïse, Catherine Filloux finds sanity in her art but by necessity must render her private theater public to make a living. As with other artists, playwrights often reassess why they create, and for whom. Thus, the conflict between art as commerce and as creation is one that professional artists face, yet from which art brut artists are free, or rather, exempt.

It is probably for this reason that so many contemporary artists are vanguards of raw art. They are taken with the idea of pure, unadulterated creativity and the question of whether or not society can attribute a price to it. It was Jean Dubuffet, the French artist, who first became obsessed with this idea of naïve (not naïf) art and coined the term "art brut" when he travelled in search of "productions d'art extraculturels" by criminals, visionaries, perverts, and the insane: *les enfants sauvages* of the art world. It was on these travels that he discovered Aloïse.

Unfortunately, it is principally Dubuffet's name with which we associate art brut, rather than with the names of the artists themselves. Because they didn't create for recognition, it may not matter that these artists remain unknown to us. But in light of the fact the study of art history includes the events that shaped their art, it is a loss that we know nothing of these people except that they were crazy. For this reason, Catherine Filloux's play "The Price of Madness," is an interesting gift. She breathes life into an artist of whom we know little (except that she was schizophrenic and painted with crayons in the manner of Chagall), and gives liberty to a woman whose adult life, art, and scant biography were confined to an asylum in Lausanne.

This is accomplished by placing Jean Dubuffet's *enfant sauvage* in a fictional context. She may still be crazy but we hear her speak, she is loved, and she is in command of her daily routine of ironing and creating.

It is often the actual Aloïse we hear in the play. Filloux excerpted dialogue from Aloïse's psychiatrist's transcripts of their sessions. After having seen Aloïse's work in the museum in Lausanne, which she found "incredibly beautiful," Catherine Filloux was struck by the strange distance Aloïse had with her art, as reflected in her comments about it. Aloïse's art is described as lyric, sensual, colorful and imaginative, yet she herself would use terms such as "vulgar" to describe one painting, calling another, "an extraordinary deluge." Her paintings, some of which we see during the play, have magnificent titles: "The Rape of the Red Lotus," "The Water Lily Train," "The Serpent Queen."

Finding the transcripts of Aloïse's sessions gave Catherine Filloux the missing link for theater: words, the woman.

Intar Theatre
420 West 42nd Street
Call Ticket Central 212/279-4200
for reservations.

See the Events section for performances.

From left to right:

Nicola Sheara

Jane Altman

Tom Schall

Liza O'Keeffe