

The Many Faces of Washington Theatre

By Susan Marya Baranoff
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The intensely social, and the intensely personal; outer and inner space. As fully as some experimental companies have embraced the exploration and expression of an individual's relationship with society, still others have seized the exploration of self. Probing their psychological and spiritual recesses, calling as much on Jung and Carl Rogers as Stanislavski, Washington's Matt Mitler and groups that have sprung up under his influence represent the furthest reaches of theatrical experimentation available to D.C. audiences.

Mitler was studying psychotherapy when he began to dabble in experimental theater. Finding many similarities between the techniques of Gestalt therapy and those of experimental, impressionistic theater, he began to incorporate the artistic discipline into his work with disturbed children. Soon he had switched emphasis altogether; instead of studying psychology and using theater as part of therapy, he was studying theater and using it as both mental and physical therapy; performance games for schizophrenics, mime techniques for the deaf.

During a lengthy stay in Europe, his work landed him in a guest professorship at Warsaw's University of Psychology. His paper on "Art and Therapy" is now part of that institution's curriculum. Theatrical study continued, however, and increasingly he turned from working with patients to working with actors.

Growing from this mixed discipline approach, and inextricable paralleling his own spiritual interests, Mitler's work became increasingly subjective, inner-oriented. In workshops, expression became secondary to experience, communication became non-verbal, or even psychic. Rituals, arguably the beginning of all theater, began to emerge: chanting, drumming, dancing, replaced traditional forms of communication. Occasionally the workshop would erupt into a surprisingly orderly free-for-all of individual improvisation.

Now commuting between Washington and New York, though returning to Europe several times yearly to lead workshops and train people in his methods, Mitler gives performances that are, not surprisingly, utterly unpredictable. Known locally as much for his improvisational comedy as for his ritualistic mystical work, he will often throw both forms into the same performance pot.

By attempting to derive the theatrical from an essentially mystical experience, Mitler's work pushes at the limits of his medium. His exploration of the very notion of theater may entirely disappear from lack of audience interest. Or, strange and difficult as it seems to today's audiences, his work may provide the alphabet from which will spring a basic vocabulary for the next generation of theater artists.