



**PARADISE PARK** — A profoundly despondent fellow (Kenneth Rudnicki) wanders into an amusement park for distraction from his agony. Inside, he slips into a fantasia of scenes - including his own romance with a young woman (Reha Zemani) from the Midwest, igniting a bundle of neuroses that keeps them estranged; a ventriloquist/philosopher (Ann Stocking) and his bifurcated dummy (David E. Frank); a tourist couple (Bo Roberts and Cynthia Mance) at the end of the tether that's barely holding their marriage together; their irate young daughter (KC Wright) who yearns, in vain, for an effete Cuban (Tim Orona); a psychotic pizza-delivery boy (Jeff Atik); a wandering violinist (Lena Kouyoumdjian); a circus clown (Troy Dunn) and, in a directorial flourish, a guy in a chicken costume.

Charles Mee's comedy is like a sonnet with a couple of repeated motifs: distraction, love and the general feeling of being cast adrift in cultural waters that are partly enchanting, partly evaporating, and partly polluted by the refuse of our ancestors, of our families, of our determination to follow impulses we barely comprehend, and to wind up unutterably lost. He's one of this company's favorite scribes, and mine, for the way in which, with the literary touch of a feather, he conjures primal truths of what keeps us at odds with ourselves and with each other, keeps us yearning for the unattainable. And though there's obviously psychology at work, the driving energy of the language and of the drama are subconscious, cultural and historical currents. Production designer Charles Duncombe anchors his platform set with a wading pool stage center, in which sits an alligator, and he decorates it above with strings of festival lights on a string. Josephine Poinso's costumes are thoroughly whimsical with primary colors and a feel for an America of the late 1950s - with the possible of exception of the married couple's matching shorts and T-shirts that read, "Kiss my ass, I'm on vacation." Director Frederique Michel stages the poetical riffs of text in her typically arch style, and it serves the play almost perfectly, except for the pizza delivery scene, where the choreography distracts from the psychosis that lies at the core.



*Photo by Paul Rubenstein*

Even so, I found the evening to be indescribably affecting, tapping emotions that lurk beneath the machinery of reason. This is the last production to be staged at this back-alley venue in Santa Monica, where the company has been putting on plays for 15 years. The ventriloquist's lines couldn't have been more ironic and true: "Then, because the theatre is the art form that deals above all others in human relationships, then theatre is the art, par excellence, in which we discover what it is to be human and what is possible for humans to be . . . that theatre, properly conceived, is not an escape either but a flight to reality, a rehearsal for life itself, a rehearsal of these human relationships of which the most essential, the relationship that defines most vividly who we are and that makes our lives possible, is love." City Garage, 1340 1/2 Fourth St., Santa Monica; Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 5:30 p.m.; thru Nov. 7. (310) 319-9939. (Steven Leigh Morris)