



*In a scene from Richard Foreman's Paradise Hotel, Tony Turbo (Tony Torn), right, and a female bellboy react to the erotic bravado of Giza von Goldenheim (Gary Wilmes), left.*

*Tony Turbo turns away from the rose-covered Ken Puss Puss (Jay Smith), an emissary of the Hotel Beautiful Roses.*





## A Hotel by Any Other Name

*Sex and sentiment battle it out in "Paradise Hotel," the latest play from Richard Foreman's Ontological-Hysteric Theater.*

BY RAPHAEL RUBINSTEIN

Photographs by Tina Barney

**P**aradise Hotel, the most recent play by avant-garde theater veteran Richard Foreman, appears to end before it has even begun. Less than a minute after the entire cast runs onto the narrow, prop-filled stage and breaks into a jerky Charleston (to a 1920s crooner whose nasal, tape-looped voice continually repeats the phrase "I'm happy, you're happy"), all action is brought to a stop by a public announcement that booms into the theater:

Ladies and gentlemen—attention please! This play, *Paradise Hotel*, must be preceded by an announcement which may well prove disturbing to certain members of this audience. But while no one desires to offend, this risk must be taken. All audiences must now be informed that this play, *Paradise Hotel*, is not, in fact, *Paradise Hotel*, but is in truth a much more disturbing and possibly illegal play entitled *Hotel Fuck*.

The blaring old-timey music returns for a moment, then the announcement continues:

We do apologize, ladies and gentlemen, but rather than being disturbed at this revelation, we urge you, please, redirect your understandable distress towards an even more potent threat posed by yet a third, much less provocatively



Giza von Goldenheim, dressed in his Louis XIV-style costume, gestures with his staff and leashed phallus. Photos this article courtesy Janet Borden Gallery, New York.

titled play, entitled *Hotel Beautiful Roses*. This third play threatens to replace, in the near future, the much more provocatively titled *Hotel Fuck*, which is now filling the stage in front of your very eyes.

This confusion about titles is immediately echoed on stage as the cast (four men and one woman) fall into surrealistic bantering (one can't really describe the characters' disjunctive, hallucinatory lines as "dialogue") about how to get to the Hotel Fuck, a legendary establishment apparently devoted to ultimate sexual abandon. The male characters, one of

whom is a chubby actor wearing an old-fashioned bonnet and dress, salivate at the idea of reaching this hostelry, where, another of them prophesies, they will be able to "fuck their brains out." In the meantime, "Julia Jacobson," the play's only female character (apart from the half-dozen young women who play the nonspeaking "guests" and "bell boys"), sexually taunts the men, whose demeanors swerve from tough guy to scared child. As usual, Foreman saddles his cast with absurd names—Tony Turbo, Tommy Tuttle, Giza von Goldenheim, Ken Puss Puss—which they constantly intone. He also follows his established practice of having some of the actors deliver their lines with exaggerated Mittel-Europa accents.

Amid a riot of violent slapstick, jarring sound effects, cartoonish props and manic language that mixes crude insults with philosophical asides, the underlying theme of *Hotel Paradise* is driven home: sexual desire as a source of terror. The characters feverishly envision the delights of the Hotel Fuck, but it turns out that no one really wants to arrive there. At the same time, they have so much invested in their dreams of erotic success that when threatened with *Hotel Fuck's* opposite—the Hotel Beautiful Roses, where sentiment presumably triumphs over sexuality—they cower. While the Hotel Beautiful Roses proves as elusive as the Hotel Fuck, its emissaries—bouquets of red roses—appear frequently, causing the characters to recoil like vampires before a holy cross.

The play's climactic symbol of sexual tyranny comes when, two thirds of the way into the piece, one of the actors, wearing a white wig and embroidered, Louis XIV-style coat, struts onstage atop foot-high *cothorni* (the raised shoes used in Greek and Roman tragedy). Emerging from his fancy breeches is an enormous black-and-gold-striped phallus (another reference to Greek drama), which he controls with a leash. To me, this kinky apparition looked straight out of Aubrey Beardsley, combining the foppish costumes from his illustrations to *The Rape of the Lock* and the oversized phalli from his pornographic *Lysistrata*. Other characters in *Paradise Hotel* reminded me of Soutine's lurid, pathos-ridden portraits of bell boys.

While the echoes of Beardsley and Soutine were, as I learned from speaking with Foreman, in my mind rather than the author's, it's not unusual for Foreman to borrow from painting for both visual and narrative elements. His 1997-98 production *Benita Canova*, for instance, was swarming with erotically charged, French-looking schoolgirls directly inspired by Balthus's paintings. The details of Foreman's sets also draw on visual art: the strings that crisscross the stage in all his productions recall Renaissance perspectival studies and the similarly ubiquitous sheets



Cast members perform a vaudevillean Charleston.

of transparent plastic that partially seal off the stage from the audience evoke the glass covering a valuable painting. (Tina Barney has captured the teeming *Hotel Paradise* set and portions of the play's action in a series of densely composed color photographs, some of which accompany this article.) Foreman once described how a distinctive element of his productions—the lights that shine down into the viewers' eyes—was a way to "fill the space, like a painter."<sup>1</sup> In an early manifesto, he related his late-'60s rejection of conventional character and plot development to Minimalism: "1967—Suddenly the theater seems ridiculous in all its manifestations. . . . The actors enter onstage and immediately, the absurdity—both in the orchestrated speech and activity—as Stella, Judd, et al. realized several years ago . . . one must reject composition in favor of shape (or something else)."<sup>2</sup> Another art reference is embedded in the very name of Foreman's company, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, which was partly inspired by Austrian performance artist/painter Hermann Nitsch's Orgies Mysteries Theater.

**B**ack on stage, the grotesquely endowed Giza von Goldenheim bullies the other characters into scenes of degradation. There follow strange doings inside a large sack, loud music, bell boys delivering enigmatic messages on silver trays, rude limericks and the bandying about of phallic table legs. Just when the chaos threatens to become unbearable, the seemingly endless hysteria is brought to a halt by Tommy Tuttle, who has earlier shot himself in the head only to bound up immediately, unhurt. Now he delivers *Paradise Hotel's* central soliloquy, an account—accompanied by otherworldly music, white screens and a white globe carried onstage by an actor whose white-bearded, old-man mask suggests an ancient deity—of a mystical vision brought on by extreme sexual frustration:



I wanted to fuck somebody so bad. And it kept on not happening and not happening and not happening and not happening! And in total frustration I threw myself onto my empty bed with a feeling—that's it, if I'm not getting fucked then I give up forever. That's it for me! But at that moment of giving up forever—Jesus! As if a switch had been thrown at the bottom of my consciousness—as if giving up all hope of sexual fulfillment—I'd suddenly fallen into an ocean of white light where, painlessly, I was burned empty of all anxiety and suffering.

Alas, Tommy Tuttle goes on to say, he could never regain this "heavenly experience." At this admission, the previous aggression and anarchy return, as one character proclaims, "Back to the real world, I'm afraid!" But after a few more minutes of pantomimed sexual violation and baby dolls flying through the air, the vision of a sex-free nirvana returns. Its announcing angel is the overweight Tony Turbo, who, in the play's penultimate moment, sheds his dress to appear stark naked, except for a giant feather headdress. Sensuously dragging his fingernails across his rolling flesh, he cries out: "Please, no more fucking. Please, please, no more fucking." As if this is what they have been awaiting during the entire play, other members of the cast echo his plea: "Oh God, me too," cries the lascivious Julia Jacobson; "Me too, me too," whimpers Ken Puss Puss. A more conventional author might leave things there, but Foreman can't resist turning the emotional tables one last time. The perennially dissatisfied Tommy Tuttle breaks the spell of a post-sexual paradise by screaming out repeatedly for the Hotel Fuck. As the inane "I'm happy, you're happy" tune returns, the cast falls into the St. Vitus-like Charleston with

which *Hotel Paradise* began, and the play is over.

Reveling in characters who act in self-contradictory ways and plays which constantly get knocked off track, Foreman champions "impulse" against social conditioning and what he terms its concomitant "spiritual and emotional stasis."<sup>3</sup> As he describes it, "the same impulse that pushes the character into 'acting out' also twists and controls the artistic structure, so that the form and sequencing of the play itself reflects that impulsive, usually suppressed energy of the human mental/emotional apparatus." And yet, as an exacting director, he also seeks "lucidity in the framing and ordering of each 'impulsive' moment and disruptive moment of dialogue and action."

Foreman's ability to pursue these aims for more than three decades—the Ontological-Hysteric Theater was founded in 1968—has a lot to do with the fact that he not only writes but also directs and produces his plays. Mounting new productions once or twice a year at a small theater in New York's East Village, he exercises complete artistic control. (He also keeps ticket prices low and the house full.) While the metaphorical settings and the visual references may change from play to play, Foreman's unyielding nonlinearity and obsessive concerns—the nature of consciousness, sex as power, 20th-century culture—remain constant. Recognizing this sameness, which he likens to the consistency in Francis Bacon's paintings, Foreman admits: "I essentially have one thing I want to say."<sup>4</sup> As the plurality of titles in *Hotel Paradise* suggests, Foreman's oeuvre may in fact constitute a single mega-play, discontinuous, disturbing but, happily, not illegal. □

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1. Michael Feingold, "An Interview with Richard Foreman," *Yale/Theatre*, Fall 1975, p. 15.
2. Richard Foreman, "Ontological-Hysteric Theater: A Manifesto," *Performance*, April 1972, p. 66.
3. This paragraph draws on Foreman's program notes for *Pearls For Pigs* (1997).
4. Josefina Ayerza and Richard Foreman, "More Hysteria, Please," *Lacanian Ink* 12, Fall 1997, p. 37.

*Richard Foreman's Hotel Paradise debuted at the Ontological Theater, St. Mark's Church In-the-Bowery, New York [Jan. 2-Apr. 18]. The play featured Juliana Francis (Julia Jacobson), Tom Pearl (Tommy Tuttle), Jay Smith (Ken Puss Puss), Tony Torn (Tony Turbo) and Gary Wilmes (Giza von Goldenheim). Currently, Hotel Paradise is touring Europe: Das Theater der Welt, Berlin [June 30-July 4]; Sommerszene, Salzburg [July 8-10]; Kanonhallen, Copenhagen [Sept. 23-26]; Maison des arts, Creteil, Paris [Oct. 1-9]; Triple X Festival, Amsterdam [Oct. 13-16]. Foreman's new play, Bad Boy Nietzsche, opens at the Ontological Theater on Feb. 1, 2000.*

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