

MANIFEST COMEDY

John Guare on New Orleans and the Louisiana Purchase.

BY JOHN LAHR

In 1803, Napoleon Bonaparte—who had sacrificed more than twenty thousand men in a failed attempt to put down the first successful slave rebellion in history, led by “the black Spartacus,” Toussaint Louverture, in Saint-Domingue (Haiti)—cut his catastrophic losses and renounced the Louisiana Territory and his hope of extending the French Empire into North America. “It is not only New Orleans that I will cede. It is the whole colony without reservation,” Bonaparte said. For the price of fifteen million dollars—more than two hundred million in today’s money—the newly United States unexpectedly found itself with an additional eight hundred and twenty-eight thousand square miles of uncharted territory, which would eventually be divided among fourteen states. It was a sweet deal—it worked out to about three cents an acre. “You have made a noble bargain for yourselves,” Talleyrand, Bonaparte’s Machiavellian foreign minister, told President Thomas Jefferson’s diplomats. “I suppose you will make the most of it.” America, in fact, made an empire of it; along with the Declaration of Independence and the framing of the Constitution, the Louisiana Purchase proved to be one of the most consequential events in the nation’s history.

The approximately fifty thousand, largely French-speaking people who lived in or around New Orleans, their “blood mixed for generations among Spanish, French, African and Native American residents,” however, “did not match the picture of American settlers that Jefferson saw in his mind’s eye,” Joseph J. Ellis writes, in “American Creation.” Laying out the range of rights to be granted to “the inhabitants of the ceded territory,” Jefferson opted to grant those rights only to “the white inhabitants.” With one stroke of his pen, he thus set in motion both the extension of slavery and the removal of Native Americans from east of the Mississippi.

John Guare’s rollicking play “A Free Man of Color” (directed by George C. Wolfe, at the Vivian Beaumont), which takes place in the racial mosh pit of pre-Purchase New Orleans, positions its fun and its fury strategically at the moment when manifest destiny and moral travesty collide. Here Jefferson and his secretary Meriwether Lewis, Bonaparte and his wife, Josephine, Louverture, Talleyrand, and a whole crew of Creole *bons vivants* rub elbows with the French farceur Georges Feydeau—yes, he makes an appearance—and attempt to run riot for two and a half hours. Welcome to Guare’s unruly comic world, a piñata of ideas and alarums that aim to replicate Artaud’s recipe for wonder: “a theater in which violent physical images crush and hypnotize the sensibility of the spectators.” Guare is a professional dazzler, his imagination a sort of Roman candle sending out noisy, exhilarating, and variable bursts of illumination.

The “free man” in question is the fop and erstwhile playwright Jacques Cornet (Jeffrey Wright), who stands before us, at the opening, in red satin shirt, purple waistcoat, purple diamond-clipped slippers, and gold stockings, more a neon sign than a glass of fashion. When his slave, Cupidon Murmur (Mos), asks him what the play he’s writing is about—its title is “A Free Man of Color or the Happy Life of a Man in Power”—Jacques answers, “The sanctity of surfaces. The value of veneer.” (This piquant line is a clue not only to Jacques’s peacock personality but also to Guare’s sleight of hand as a caricaturist—his distortions do for American history what R. Crumb did for the sixties.) But Jacques’s real theatrical production is himself; he makes a spectacle of identity, dramatizing the dandy’s desire both to be accepted by and to rebel against society. Wright is an outstanding actor, who, on film, has memorably played such figures as Martin Luther King, Jr., Muddy Waters, and

Jean-Michel Basquiat. But, a serious, guarded man, he has an internal, rather than a presentational, strength. Unlike Mos, who—both as Murmur and as Louverture—has a humor and gravity that immediately establish a rapport with the audience, Wright has something mysterious and unbiddable about him. Onscreen, this makes him captivating, even dangerous, but as a theatrical rake he comes across as self-conscious and lacklustre. The play was conceived as a vehicle for Wright, and he makes the role work technically, of course, but, spiritually speaking, the antic isn’t in him. He’s not mischievous; nor is he believably priapic, as the high jinks of the first act require him to be. At its emotional core, therefore, “A Free Man of Color” feels slightly off kilter. Still, when Jacques is dealt a wild card by the Louisiana Purchase, late in the second act, and finds himself reenslaved and reduced to the tatters that signal his nonentity, Wright comes vivaciously into his own. Ferocity, not frivolity, is his music.

The drama of America’s unexplored terrain—“the white spaces”—is one of the most fascinating ideas the play throws up. “An inland river must cross this vast unknown land. A river from the isle of California that somehow meets the Mississippi—but where?” Jacques, who is obsessed with maps, says to Murmur, who is busy panhandling the audience for spare change to buy his freedom. But the theme feels shoehorned onto Jacques, who doesn’t need a route to the Pacific—though Jefferson does. Guare sniffs around this terrific notion, but he can’t figure out how to mine it for comic gold. At one point, Meriwether Lewis (Paul Dano), later of the Lewis and Clark expedition, urges the President to let him go exploring, “to decipher what is unknown.” “If you want the unknowable get a wife,” Jefferson (John McMartin) replies, a good joke that distracts from the essential farcical fact of the Louisiana Purchase: no one knew where the borders lay or what, exactly, was being purchased. “Neither France nor Spain, although the original contracting partners, were competent to decide the meaning of their own contract,” Henry Adams observed.

“The future is always about speed,” Jacques says. Speed is also essential to actors who are skating on the thin ice of theatrical travesty, where history and

comedy coexist without psychology. Wolfe, who has brilliantly wrangled Guare's sprawling original manuscript, whips up the imagery to a dashing pace. In this scenic hubbub, the actors can convey little more than their outlines and their attitudes. Still, the dazed and dis-trait white Haitian exiles Count Achille Creux (Peter Bartlett) and his nervy, tight-lipped scientist wife, the dour Doña Polisenna (Veanne Cox), stand out. With his spaniel's face and flapping pampered hands, Bartlett prowls the stage hilariously broadcasting racial hatred. "We will go to the ball as corpses," he announces. "I shall costume myself as a ghost of what the white man used to be." The wafer-thin Cox, for her part, gets big laughs when Polisenna trembles in her underwear at the prospect of Jacques's seduction and speaks Latin as she is offered up on his altar of love.

Wolfe is always alert to the paradoxical subtleties of racism, yet his staging of the story of the Louisiana Purchase never once alludes to the Native American inhabitants of the territory, whose fate was also sealed by the deal. His genius is more for presentation than penetration; the production is full of luscious, suggestive visual pleasures. For me, the most remarkable was the conjuring up of the doomed French fleet by actors wearing battleships atop their tricorne hats. This surreal scenic moment perfectly evoked the play's literary-historical dreamscape. Watching "A Free Man of Color," you feel as if Guare had fallen asleep over his books and dreamed his own journey into the unknown—a terra incognita of excitement and weirdness, the familiar and the confounding, which, like all vivid dreams, is as exhausting as it is stimulating.

"We have the wolf by the ear, and we can neither hold him nor safely let him go," Jefferson said of slavery. "Justice is in one scale and self-preservation in the other." In the case of Craig Wright's "Mistakes Were Made" (directed by Dexter Bullard, at the Barrow Street), Felix Artifex (Michael Shannon), a minor producer and major luftmensch, who is trying to hold on to a star for a mooted Broadway play about the French Revolution, is the wolf, the ears, and the whole desperate project of self-preservation. "Just tell me: how many lines more than King Louis would that character have to

have to make this work for you," Artifex asks his star, working one of ten phone lines in his grubby office. "Yes, I'm serious: just tell me and I'll make it happen." As Shannon plays him, Artifex is a whirlwind of backpedalling, persiflage, and ignorant mendacity. "Ground-breaking but in a good way" is how he describes the star's reaction to the playwright's work,

playwright, while pushing for a top-to-bottom rewrite to accommodate his star. "Yes, life is unbearable and short and people wanna be entertained." Shannon superbly rides the waves of laughter as Artifex struggles in vain to land the star, talk to his ex-wife, and negotiate with what seem to be Middle Eastern thugs, who have hijacked a caravan of sheep that are



Jeffrey Wright as a playwright and "free man of color" in New Orleans, in 1801.

as he tries to persuade the playwright to add a new and entirely inappropriate character to the play. "The one who comes into the room *with* Pierre in that scene," he says. "Robespierre, sorry! Robespierre. Yeah. *With* him."

"Mistakes Were Made" is essentially a one-man show, with the offstage presence of a harassed secretary, Esther (Mierka Girtlen), and the onstage presence of a very ugly goldfish, to whom Shannon occasionally grouches and with whom he shares his dreams of glory. These elements shrewdly vary the play's tone and create the illusion of event in what amounts to a nearly pitch-perfect channeling of a producer's browbeating maneuvers. "Steven, here's the deal: life is unbearable and short," Artifex tells the balky

another of Artifex's blighted entrepreneurial schemes. Or, at least, I think that's the story. Nobody cares. The sight and sound of Shannon going up in smoke while lying, cajoling, and threatening people on two continents is worth the price of admission. It's an exquisite piece of comic writing, fully realized by a well-judged and delightful performance. "Helen, you are a fucking theatrical agent, O.K.!" Shannon shouts into the phone, as if he were talking to an I.T. specialist in New Delhi. "You read plays, you go to lunch, you manage your vegan diet, and every now and then you say the word 'no': you are swimming in the fucking kiddie pool!" Wright, a Chicago playwright, is new to me. But I won't be missing any more of his plays, and neither should you. ♦