

This 'Flea' Delivers a Stylish Bite at Stages

Director, a dexterous cast and innovative staging mine buried treasures in farce.

Theater Review

By PHILIP BRANDES
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

From its opening image of an adulterous chambermaid in contorted coupling with her employer's nephew, an inventive Stages Theatre Center revival of George Feydeau's 1907 romp "A

Flea in Her Ear" impresses with its stylish staging as well as the physical dexterity of its cast.

Looping the polished conventions of French farce full circle to their commedia dell'arte roots, Brazilian director Gulu Monteiro employs highly physical character interpretation, alternating outdoor and indoor performance spaces, and minimal props to pare the piece down to its performance essentials.

In the process, he mines edgy buried treasures from Feydeau's elegantly contrived tale of infidelity, lust and mistaken identity.

Each actor performs at least two roles—one of the aristocratic prin-

ripals, and another from the serving class.

In a wry implicit comment on the latter characters' lesser substantiality, they're differentiated with masks created by the performers.

Predictable antics ensue when a suspicious wife (Clara Beller) sets a trap for her husband (Albie Selznick), using her comely friend (Ann Michele Fitzgerald) as bait.

Herb Mendelsohn, Jamie Donovan and Jay Ferguson supply the plot-complicating ingredients. Charles Fathy demonstrates particular range as a timid, crooked valet and a hot-tempered Spaniard out to avenge his wife's betrayal.

Monteiro sets the play's domestic scenes in the Stages' rear outdoor amphitheater, then moves to the narrow inside theater when the locale shifts to a hotel of ill repute.

At the reviewed performance, electrical problems in the latter space had little apparent impact on the capable cast—an unintended validation of the minimal staging approach.

"A Flea in Her Ear," Stages Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood. Thursdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m. Ends Sept. 2. \$20. (323) 465-1010. Running time: 1 hour, 40 minutes.

A Flea in Her Ear

(Stages Theater Center
99 seats; \$20 top)

A Stages Theater Center presentation of a play in one act by Georges Feydeau, translated by Clara Bellar, Herb Mendelsohn, and cast, conceived and directed by Gulu Monteiro. Lights, Harry M. Dixon IV. Opened July 20, 2001; reviewed Aug. 30; closed Sept. 9. Running time: 95 MIN.

Monique/Chandel:

Eugenia Clara Bellar

Chandel/Poche Albie Selznick

Anninette/Lucienne:

Olympe Ann Michele Fitzgerald

Tourneil Jamie Donovan

Etienne/Homenides Charles Fathy

Camille/Ferailon Jay Ferguson

Dr. Finache/Rugby Herb Mendelsohn

By JULIO MARTINEZ

Brazilian director Gulu Monteiro's staging of Georges Feydeau's 1907 lighter-than-air farce is reminiscent of the transcendent genre-busting commedia dell'arte adaptations by the San Francisco Mime Troupe back in the '60s. Monteiro imbues Feydeau's ribald, plot-flimsy bedroom comedy with the slapstick humor of medieval Italian street comedy. This emphasis on stick-laden physicality often impedes the intended rapid-fire plot machinations of these Feydeau folk, but the adroit antics of this excellent seven-member ensemble more than compensate.

The plot is almost inconsequential. Successful Paris businessman Chandel (Albie Selznick) has experienced a sudden lack of conjugal ability, which has comely wife Monique (Clara Bellar) believing he must be indulging in extramarital hanky-panky. To test his fidelity, she instigates an entrapment scenario that involves her beautiful best friend Lucienne (Ann Michele Fitzgerald), a provocative perfumed letter and a supposed illicit rendezvous at an infamous hotel of ill repute.

This sets in motion a calamitous series of misadventures that includes Chandel's handsome, narcissistic business partner Tourneil (Jamie Donovan); Lucienne's murderously jealous Spanish husband, Homenides (Charles Fathy); Chandel's speech-impaired but lusty nephew Camille (Jay Ferguson); jovial family physician Dr. Finache (Herb Mendelsohn); alcoholic hotel clerk Poche, who looks amazingly like Chandel; and a menagerie of masked commedia characters who enliven all these amoral comings and goings.

Monteiro has inventively given each of his actors the task of portraying an upper-class sophisticate as well as doubling (sometimes tripling) as a masked working-class buffoon. In true commedia style, these irreverent folk take on the stylized characteristics of various

animals as their antics overflow beyond the outdoor stage setting. At one point, they order the audience out of the open-air space and into an indoor setting that houses the aforementioned hotel bedroom shenanigans. Then it's back outdoors for a speedy plot wrapup.

All this audience shifting wreaks havoc with the continuity of Feydeau's basic plot, but the cast keeps the commedia action moving along. One successful comedy bit involves the hilarious antics of misanthropic hotel owner Ferailon (Ferguson), his aged former courtesan wife, Olympe (Fitzgerald), and their cleaning woman Eugenia (Bellar) as they try to spruce up the hotel for the expected guests.

The most memorable moments of this production are provided by Bellar and Fitzgerald, who offer telling portrayals no matter what persona they inhabit. Bellar's quick-witted, coyly devious Monique is contrasted beautifully by her outing as Eugenia, the slow-moving but ever-observant cleaning lady who hates to clean. Fitzgerald's transformations are even more amazing as she segues rapidly from Lucienne to sexually liberated maid Antoinette to Olympe, often within the same scene.

Selznick is memorable in his dual role as straight man Chandel and the ever-intoxicated Poche. Fathy is deliciously over-the-top, both as Homenides and as Antoinette's oft-cuckolded butler husband, Etienne. The vocal antics of Ferguson's Camille are as uproarious as they are unfathomable, and Mendelsohn proves quite effective both as the innocuous Dr. Finache and as pugnacious, sex-starved British tourist Rugby.

Daily Variety 9/10/01

BACK STAGE WEST

July 26, 2001

July 26, 2001

REVIEWS

A FLEA IN HER EAR at Stages Theatre Center



Reviewed by Polly Warfield

Something extraordinary is going on at Stages Theatre Center. Unattended by any hoopla or fanfare, it seems to be a well-kept secret. Director Gulu Monteiro of Rio de Janeiro mounts a lively version of *A Flea in Her Ear* in which master farceur Georges Feydeau's Parisian panache, *je ne sais quoi*, and ooh-la-la get a shot of Brazilian heat and brim. It's a volatile mix. Nonstop action begins when married lady Antoinette gets a flea in her ear and a bee in her bonnet, wrongly suspects her husband, Chandel, of infidelity, and sets a crafty plot to catch him at it. The ensuing whirligig of misapprehension and much ado about nothing draws everyone in before the snarl is untangled.

Guide and mentor Monteiro, who heads his own commedia-styled theatre of gesture, mask, and movement in Rio, creates a disciplined ensemble from assembled actors who earn enthusiastic applause for the hard work, commitment, and artistry with which they adapt to his distinctive technique. Seven actors portray two or three times that many characters, aided by a menagerie of masks in bird or animal mode—pig, sparrow, owl, camel—which reveal as they conceal, protect as they liberate the actor within.

There are two women in the cast but seem to be more. Both delicately fashioned and reed-slender, they are Ann Michele Fitzgerald's blonde Antoinette and Parisian actress Clara Bellar (seen as the French nanny robot in Stephen Spielberg's film *A.I.*) as her brunette friend Monique. The uncanny alacrity with which they doff fancy hats and fringed shawls and don masks, aprons, and babushkas to become silly simpering servitors is exceeded only by Albie Selznick's split-second exits as Chandel and entrances as loutish hotel porter Poche. Upper-class Chandel and lowly Poche share such uncanny physical resemblance they confuse even themselves.

Jay Ferguson's humbling servant Camille speaks gibberish; no one can understand him. Forget sensitivity—this is flat-out farce. Jamie Donovan's Tournel is a dandy who fancies himself a ladies' man. Splendidly fiery Charles Fathy is Monique's irrationally jealous Spanish husband. Herb Mendelsohn strikes a note of mild-mannered sanity as Chandel's friend Dr. Firache. All also essay various lackeys and underlings, and employ a stylized mode of locomotion combining scurry, scuttle, scamper, and crouch that speeds the action.

Gulu's emphasis is on actor and style, not so much on *mise en scène*. The play whizzes by, both indoors and out, without intermission. When a helicopter whirrs overhead, quick-witted Bellar incorporates it into her dialogue. To quote one of the characters: "It's not a question of quality, there's plenty of that. It's a question of idiosyncrasy." There's plenty of both, plus admirable actors' art, in Brazilian Gulu's French farce—fast, frenzied and funny.

"A Flea in Her Ear," presented by and at Stages Theatre Center, 1540 N. McCadden Place, Hollywood, Thurs.-Sat. 8 p.m., Sun. 7 p.m., July 19-Sept. 2, \$15-20, (323) 465-1010.

Flawless 'Flea' collars laughs

By Evan Henerson
Theater Critic

While some theatrical companies may have the luxury of bringing out opulent costumes and scenery, frill-free, bare-bones drama can be just as fulfilling. You can do quite a bit with a sure-handed ensemble, a bare stage — or two — a bunch of commedia masks and a director who knows which pieces belong in which holes.

REVIEW

Witness the whip-smart, joyful rendition of Georges Feydeau's "A Flea in Her Ear" currently playing to full houses at the tiny Stages Theater Center in Hollywood. Here's a seven-person acting company whose character-jumping versatility is a thing of beauty. The production's director, Gulu Monteiro, should be on many companies' "must hire" list once this "Flea" gets proper buzz and exposition.

Monteiro, a Brazilian actor and director schooled in every imaginable form of drama, gives Feydeau's oft-performed farce a kind of ribald carnival spirit. A well-placed scarf, hood and — most important — commedia mask allow the actors to slip easily into multiple roles. We're tracking a zany plot involving errant love letters, mistaken identities, adultery and coincidence. In this version, conceived by the director and cast, the sensibility may be 19th century, but the execution is decidedly modern. Salty humor is very much the order of the day, as is physical comedy.

The action begins on an outdoor stage

"A FLEA IN HER EAR"

Where: Stages Theater Center, 1540 McCadden Place, Hollywood.

When: 8 p.m. Thursday through Saturday, 7 p.m. Sunday; through Sept. 2.

Tickets: \$15 to \$20. Call (323) 465-1010.

Our rating: ★★★★★

under a white parachute, at the home of Victor-Emmanuel Chandel (played by Albie Selznick), a man as "faithful as a poodle" whose wife Monique (Clara Bellar) nonetheless manages to doubt his fidelity. With the help of best friend Lucienne (Ann Michele Fitzgerald) Monique hatches a plot to trap Chandel. They decide to send him a perfumed love letter, written by Lucienne, proposing a rendezvous and they show up at the appointed place and time to catch Chandel.

Would that things were so easy. Gunning up the machinery is Chandel's lady-killing best friend, Tournel (Jamie Donovan); Camille (Jay Ferguson), a manservant with a hilariously PC-absent speech impediment; an amorous doctor (Herb Mendelsohn) and Homenides (Charles Fathy), Lucienne's insanely jealous husband with a hair-trigger temper. Later on, we also meet the equally colorful proprietors of the Pink Pussy Hotel where all the trysts take place and where their drunken bellboy, Poche, is — go figure! — a dead ringer for Chandel.

Once the action moves to the Pink Pussy, the audience moves indoors along with the actors. And inside Stages' cozy little black box, things really get manic and frisky. Feydeau was more than willing to



Clara Bellar, left, enlists Ann Michele Fitzgerald to help confirm suspicions about her husband in Stages Theater Center's "A Flea in Her Ear."

go for a lowbrow laugh — at the expense of, say, foreigners or doctors, and at Stages, Monteiro and company are very much up to the demands.

It may be the easiest, cheapest gag in creation, but it has been many moons since I have laughed as hard as I did at Ferguson's incomprehensible speech impediment — or at the character's transformation when he slips in an artificial palette. The difference between unlucky Camille and Feraillon, the military brute of a hotel keeper also played — with equal comic finesse — by Ferguson, is part of what makes you appreciate the possibilities of live stage.

That kind of deft double duty, sending you to your program with every "new

character's" quick entrance, is all over the place at Stages. The straight-arrow Chandel is not even a distant cousin to the brain-addled Poche, even with Selznick in both roles. Bellar also gets some choice mileage as a shiftless hotel maid. All servants or lower-stationed characters wear masks.

Clocking in at under two hours (no intermission, thanks very much), the performance flies. Take an extra six minutes after the performance to watch a video documenting Monteiro's process of building this production. From mask work to character development to the translation, the performance was very much a group effort.

Clearly, there's something to be said for collaboration.

PICK OF THE WEEK

A FLEA IN HER EAR

Gulu Monteiro's vivid re-conception of Georges Feydeau's 1907 satirical romp (translated by Clara Bellar and Herb Mendelsohn) — a mix of salacious sex, extravagant comic energy and mistaken identity — is stupendously funny as essayed by a disciplined, dedicated ensemble. A polished classical farce is the result, with characters who remain real, even while entangled in ludicrous situations of bungled adultery in rooms with too many doors. Bellar is elegant as Monique Chandel, a woman who suspects her husband of infidelity. As Chandel, Albie Selznick is a paradigm of anxiety, equally funny as a drunken porter who so closely resembles the beleaguered husband that farce begets burlesque. Monique asks Lucienne (a delightful Ann Michele Fitzgerald) to write an anonymous note to lure Chandel to the Pretty Pussy, a house which operates as a refuge for adulterous lovers. Complicating the confusion are Lucienne's jealous husband, Homenides (a dashing dangerous Charles Fathy), boulevardier Tournel (a nicely suave Jamie Donovan); the priapic Dr. Finache (co-translator Mendelsohn); and the vocally challenged Camille (Jay Ferguson in a terrific physically comic performance). All the leads play secondary parts, wearing classical masks for their downmarket roles, creating a stunning theatrical ambiance that relies on performance rather than elaborate physical settings. Stages Theater Center, 1540 N. McCadden Pl., Hlywd.; Thurs.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; thru Sept. 2. (323) 465-1010.

—Madeleine Shaner

Fleas in Their Ears

Georges Feydeau strikes home BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS



Crazy Spaniard in Hollywood
(Charles Fathy)



Crazy Spaniard in Culver City
(Vincent Giovanni)

GEORGES FEYDEAU'S SPIRIT HANGS OVER LOS Angeles — for the time being, at least. That two stagings of his celebrated yet rarely produced French farce, *A Flea in Her Ear*, should have opened across town on the same night — taking each show's producer by surprise — is exactly the kind of coincidence that punctuates Feydeau's entire body of work. The version at Culver City's Ivy Substation is put on by a group named, ironically enough, Two of a Kind Productions.

Feydeau took over from 19th-century Parisian vaudeville, writing most of his 39 comedies between 1881 and 1916, plays ostensibly about infidelity and jealousy among the wealthy bourgeoisie of France's Third Republic. But *Flea*, like all farce, is really about the comic fallacy of logic. With diligent craft, Feydeau establishes a line of action from one strategically faulty premise, and then has us watch the relentless march of cause and effect, and of hypocrites and deceivers, like lemmings, up a cliff and over the edge.

The wrong people keep finding themselves face to face, at precisely the wrong moments, building ever new layers of misunderstanding and chaos. The play's mechanics — and by extension, its philosophy — make a mockery of everyone, particularly those who presume they can control destiny.

Flea concerns the ill-fated scheme of Madame Chandebise (Jennifer Buttell) to trap her loyal hubby, Victor (Scott Martin), in an act of adultery after his abruptly limp sexual performance provokes her mistrust. Madame Chandebise plots to have her friend, Lucienne Homenides (Amy Langer), plant a seductive letter inviting the Monsieur for a liaison at a disreputable hotel named Coq d'Or, or the Golden Cock (which probably suggests today much what it did in 1907, when the play premiered).

Her stupid idea is to show up herself at the scene of betrayal. Victor, however flattered by the letter, considers infidelity only for a flash before succumbing to cold feet and the arguments of his bachelor friend Tournel (a nimble, foppish turn by Marc Hart), who offers to go to the hotel in Victor's place.

But Madame C. and Tournel already have a backstreet courtship going, and so now they've unwittingly scheduled a rendezvous at what is one step up from a whorehouse. Thus begins the little parade of hypocrites, dressed up in Andrew Otero's lush costumes, who march across director Mario Di Gregorio's ornate period set. (One of the visual jokes has Lucienne, while waiting for Madame C., sitting in a parlor by a fireplace, beneath a painting of a woman sitting in a parlor by a fireplace.)

You can almost predict that Madame C.'s perfumed letter, handwritten by Lucienne, will be discovered by Lucienne's ragingly jealous husband, a Spaniard named Carlos Homenides (Vincent Giovanni), who, pistol waving, dashes across the stage shouting, "Pula! Pula!" (No, this isn't a "character driven" enterprise.) Chandebise's nephew, Camille (Kerr Seth Lordygan), lurches around, eyes boggling, exasperated from the stifled speech caused by his cleft palate, while trying to consummate his own affair with the maid (Michelle Villemaire), who happily cheats on her butler husband (Jamison Yang).

But the farce turns social when the Golden Cock's idiot porter — gleefully and constantly kicked in the shins by the hotel proprietor, Feraillon (Gary Weinberg) — turns out to be the spitting image of Monsieur Chandebise. In fact, he's played by the same actor, revealing Martin's impressive versatility. This, of course, results in Chandebise, and the wealthy class he represents, being kicked in the shins as well. Not even his posh clothes can protect him from Feraillon's lunatic sadism.

A number of surprise meetings come about mechanically via a revolving bed that, installed in the play's hotel room for no discernible purpose, spins behind the wall with the push of a button, revealing the bed from next door. Indeed, the entire plot transpires from similarly mechanical motives, similarly without a sensible purpose, rendering that silly machine a metaphor for the workings of the world.

Director Di Gregorio has some politically incorrect fun by adding an ethnic cliché to Feydeau's gallery of stereotypes from French society, casting the cuckolded butler as a Chinese immigrant who speaks in a barely intelligible Charlie Chan accent. ("He's the chief medical officer of Boston Rife.") This, with Camille's speech impediment, points to Di Gregorio's larger point, however rude and jocular, about the levels of incomprehension among the characters.

Di Gregorio juxtaposes the well-choreographed lunacy (accompanied by a callope in Ellen Monocroussos' sound design) against the frequent appearances of an old, droll doctor played by Howard DeWitt with wry detachment — a tone that provides the play with its overriding, slightly sardonic point of view.

This is a lovely, richly conceived production, slightly undone by John Mortimer's British Isles translation. These fine actors just can't get their American dialects around phrases like "Oh, what a bloody nuisance" and "Cheeky bugger." And, of course, "He's mad" has a different meaning on each side of the Atlantic.

NO SUCH PROBLEM OVER AT HOLLYWOOD'S STAGES Theater Center, where the farce is being performed in an original translation by Clara Bellar, Herb Mendelsohn and the cast. The most obvious differences are changes in some of the characters' names, and a certain abbreviation and feminization of the play. The Golden Cock is rechristened the Pink Pussy. Where, in Mortimer's translation, the Spaniard screams at Victor, "I'll kill you like a dog!" here, the line becomes "I'll kill you like a chicken!"

This may or may not be intended to play off the image of the butler (Charles Fathy) strutting across the stage dressed mostly in black (like everyone else) and with a white mask, head bobbing, very henlike. Indeed, almost all of the actors take on conspicuous animal traits, and double between playing a primary character sans mask and a secondary character with one.

Brazilian director Gulu Monteiro has prepared this ensemble with weeks of intensive commedia workshops, and the results are evident in a fiery physicality — from profoundly invested actors and from striking visual poses in an otherwise Spartan production.

The theater's outdoor amphitheater becomes the setting for the Chandebises' parlor; in Act 2, when the action moves to the hotel, the audience moves with it, to the indoor theater; then, back outside for the bookending Act 3 — a whimsical use of site-specific theater.

Monteiro strips bare the era and its theatrical accoutrements, such as parasols and lacy costumes, in favor of raw energy, posture and timing — as though moving the play from Feydeau's France to some imagined land between 16th-century Naples and Jerzy Grotowski's Poland. Not surprisingly, it becomes a different play en route. The comedy's drier qualities take on an overarching mania. Though both versions are about caricature, Monteiro's crazed-comedy hybrid, with its masks and animal personae, is more about identity, and less about the goofiness of logic itself. Yet so much of Feydeau involves the logistics of characters colliding that the shortcomings of Monteiro's concept probably wouldn't be so noticeable in any genre other than French farce. This is because Feydeau's lunacy is partly one of scale — of the visual extravagance from all his ridiculous people and subplots. The effect is diminished when an ensemble of 14 is halved, with actors playing two roles. That means there's half as many door slams, and, by the end of Act 2, slamming doors is what Feydeau is really all about. □