

REVIEWS AND NEWS



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Tom Irwin and Amy Morton in Tina Landau's new play, "Space."

THEATER REVIEW

In Search of the Voices Hidden in the Vastness

By BEN BRANTLEY

Ah, the kindness of silence! You know the sensation: that feeling of gratitude that arrives when a jackhammer or a car alarm or a crying baby suddenly shuts up.

Well, that's what felt in the second act of "Space," Tina Landau's excruciatingly chatty celebration of the mysteries of the cosmos, when all dialogue, song and sound effects cease for a full two minutes while a man and woman open their ears to celestial harmonies. It's as though a migraine, after increasing in intensity for two hours, had vanished. And it is unquestionably the canniest choice that Ms. Landau, who both wrote and directed the play, makes here.

Since "Space" is about learning to find the sounds in silence and the virtues of questions without answers, this speech-free moment is certainly appropriate. Whether it warrants slogging through the manic babble that precedes it is another matter.

From its beginning "Space," which opened last night at the Joseph Papp Public Theater after productions in Chicago and Los Angeles, advocates that one "listen deeply" and with an open mind. It then proceeds to reiterate this advice so often, and with such fortune-cookie sententiousness, that your instinctive response is less to tune in than to tune out.

Inspired by a stormy chapter in the academic career of John E. Mack, a professor at Harvard, "Space" examines the personal and

Patients take their neuropsychiatrist on a spacewalk.

professional consequences that befall Dr. Allan Saunders (Tom Irwin), a neuropsychiatrist and celebrity scholar, when he starts to take seriously patients' claims that they were abducted by extraterrestrials.

The scientific certainties by which Allan has lived start to dissolve; so do his professional status, his ability to speak coherently and his chances of getting a good night's sleep. With the help of the resonantly named Dr. Bernadette Jump Cannon (Amy Morton), a beautiful astronomer, Allan comes to accept that science is less a matter of, in his phrase, "the acquisition of power" than of humility.

It is hard to argue with the show's central premise, which is basically Hamlet's contention that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in the pragmatist's philosophy. But "Space," which was commissioned by the Steppenwolf Theater Company in Chicago, never translates the assertion into the physics of energetic drama.

Featuring pretty astral projections by Jan Hartley with matching original music and sound design by Ron Milburn and Michael Bodeen, the evening starts to feel like a 1960's-style sound-and-light show produced for an introductory high school class called "Science Can Be Fun."

SPACE

Written and directed by Tina Landau; sets by James Schuette; costumes by Melina Root; lighting by Scott Zielinski; original music and sound by Rob Milburn and Michael Bodeen; projection design by Jan Hartley; production dramaturg, Shirley Fishman; production stage manager, James Latus; senior director, external affairs, Margaret M. Lioi; associate producer, Wiley Hausam; artistic associate, Brian Kulick; associate producer, Bonnie Metzgar; general manager, Michael Hurst. Presented by the Joseph Papp Public Theater/New York Shakespeare Festival, George C. Wolfe, producer; Rosemarie Tichler, artistic producer; Mark Litvin, managing director. At Martinson Hall in the Joseph Papp Public Theater, 425 Lafayette Street, East Village.

WITH: Tom Irwin (Dr. Allan Saunders), Theresa McCarthy (the singer), Amy Morton (Dr. Bernadette Jump Cannon), Larry Keith (Dr. Jim Lacey), Andersen Gabrych (Devin McFallen), Kristine Nielsen (Joan Bailey), Teagle F. Bougere (Taj Mahal) and Daniel Lee Smith (Carl Himayo).

In considering how space holds the key to "the dual universe of the cosmos and the depths of the human heart," Ms. Landau's script cites Jung, Stephen Hawking, Joseph Campbell, Lewis Carroll and L. Frank Baum. It also provides a show-and-tell sequence seemingly inspired by Thomas S. Kuhn's "Structure of Scientific Revolutions," in which Galileo, Freud and Einstein materialize to demonstrate how conceptual paradigms keep changing.

The staging plays with ideas of the simultaneity of time, expressed through cinematic-style cross-cutting among Allan's conversations with his patients (Andersen Gabrych, Kristine Nielsen and Teagle F. Bougere), his disapproving academic mentor (Larry Keith) and the beautiful Dr. Cannon and her prickly assistant (Daniel Lee Smith). It may therefore be intentional that there is no sense of dramatic development whatsoever.

Mr. Irwin's hyper, logorrheic scientist seems both unhinged and game for anything from the beginning, so there's little tension in his intellectual metamorphosis. Of the characters, only Bernadette merges thematic intent and psychological specificity, and Ms. Morton brings an anchoring understatement to her part. The self-deprecating awkwardness with which she flavors phrases like "the music of the spheres" has its own honest eloquence, suggesting the frustration of being reduced to clichés in the face of the imponderable.

Ms. Landau must have felt something similar in staging "Space." The eccentric but precise visual stagecraft at which Ms. Landau, the director of "Floyd Collins" and "Dream True," has traditionally excelled is absent here. Her trademark use of synchronized ritualistic movements feels perfunctory. So do all those flashing lights and swirling projected images.

"Space" also features a muselike apparition, played by Theresa McCarthy, who sings sweetly to Allan of the vast solitude of the universe, while wearing white Druidical robes and a boyish haircut. It says much about the limited imagination of "Space" that the spirit of the cosmos turns out to be a ringer for Enya, the popular priestess of New Age music.

DANCE REVIEW

The Sound and Feel Of Jazzy Urban Bustle

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

"I live on C-sharp Street, and my friend lives on B-flat Avenue." These are the first words the audience heard in the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater's latest premiere on Friday night at City Center. The title of the work, "C-sharp Street-B-flat Avenue," refers to the previous line from "I Live in Music," a poem by Ntozake Shange.

Jawole Willa Jo Zollar, the choreographer and director of Urban Bush Women, has created a funky and often dazzling jazz-inspired piece in which dance and music become one. The work is a blast of energetic movement channeled into an artistic blender.

Images of the street dances of today merge with swing dances of the past while Ms. Zollar's customary borrowings from Afro-Caribbean dance fuse into an overall flow of modern-dance techniques.

The Hancher Auditorium, a forward-looking arts sponsor at the University of Iowa, commissioned the work, which is a perfect match between Ms. Zollar and the Ailey polish. The piece is more abstract than Ms. Zollar's social-protest works; it has the open-ended aura of a jam session infused with the dancers' sassiness and virtuosity.

Although the music is on tape, one has a taste of the interaction between Ms. Shange's recited lines and the music by the jazz composer David

Murray. The second half of "C-sharp Street" is performed to Mr. Murray's "Picasso Suites." Most of the music in the first half is by Michael Wimberly, sometimes in collaboration with Ms. Zollar.

The weak point is the dip in the middle when the piece seems to go nowhere and exists for its own moment. Yet at its most exciting (the audience cheered), the choreography is emblematic of its theme: Dance turns into music and music transformed into dance.

Stefani Mar's brightly colored costumes and Roma Flowers's lighting imaginatively changing the setting through different hues, add to the good humor. Solange Sandy Groves with Benoit-Swan Pouffer, and Ashley Thomas with Amos J. Machanic were the couples who led off to Ms. Wimberly's "Reggae Jump." There was plenty of attitude to go around. Guillermo Asca and Bahiyah Sayyid came in with low-slung pliés and rotating torsos, followed by trios and an ensemble that incorporated the hop and a moon walk.

Jeffrey Gerodias, gyrating into a half-split, smoothly led the first of the male solos and looked persuasively as if he could not stop dancing. The "Sound Falls Round Me" section was followed by a fanciful, hip-swinging dance for seven women as one voice declaimed, "I got 15 trumpets where other women got hips." Ms. Wimberly's music propelled the dancing until Mr. Murray's distinct jazz sound ushered in looser, less percussive dancing. Dwana Adia

TELEVISION REVIEW

Cinderella Meets the Muppets

By RON WERTHEIMER

Elmo, that adorable Muppet, may come from the noncommercial confines of "Sesame Street," but he is no stranger to the marketplace. Not only is he the little red prince of the toy store, he recently starred in a big-screen movie. So he's just the guy to headline a holiday special tonight on Fox, sponsored by the Kmart stores where, no doubt, much Elmo merchandise is on display.

Tonight's show, "CinderElmo," comes from the Children's Television Workshop and includes the whole platoon of "Sesame Street" Muppets, so at least you might expect something truly special. The colorful show does display a few flashes of wit. But you'll find the magic sold out.

This retelling (retailing?) of "Cinderella" casts Elmo as the poor soul mistreated and overworked by an evil stepmother, played with uncharacteristic restraint by Kathy Najimy. Her diverse household includes her favored sons, the Muppets Telly Monster and Baby Bear, one of whom she hopes to marry off to the princess (Keri Russell), as well as a dog named Prince, and Elmo's constant companion, Zoe.

When the stepmother leads her boys off to the ball at the palace,



Jen Lombardo/

Keri Russell, the Princess, with the title Muppet in "CinderElmo."

Elmo's wish to follow brings a visit from his bumbling helper (Olive Platt) who introduces himself as "your fairy godfather — excuse me, your fairy godperson," and admits that he's new at this: "I'm a temp, O.K."

Elmo wants to go to the ball. The godperson advises in song, "If you got a dream, do something," the requisite Uplifting Message in the script by Tony Geiss, who also wrote the songs. Then the godperson does a little dance: "This is a simple step-kick. Do you like it? It's good for

BRIDGE

Alan Truscott

Strategies and Anecdotes In Books From the Experts

Three world-famous player-writers have chosen to offer in books, in time for the holidays, fine selections of their writings that have appeared in other forms.

"Classic Kantar" (190 pages, \$17.95) is Eddie Kantar's collection of humorous bridge stories, some told against himself, that have appeared in magazines. Many feature his old friends, new friends and girlfriends, and one confesses to a part score in which he goes down three after the opponents have scored all six of their trumps separately. He now believes that drawing trumps has something to be said for it.

"The Big Game" (107 pages, \$22.95) is Robert Sheehan's account of rubber bridge play at T.G.R.'s club in London, where he writes a column

for The Times. The top stake is 100 pounds a hundred, equivalent to \$1.50 a point on this side of the Atlantic, and the cast of characters includes, on occasion, experts from the United States, Norway, Poland, Australia and New Zealand.

One of these is the formidable Zia Mahmood, whose columns in The Guardian form the basis for "Around the World in 80 Hands," written with David Burn (254 pages, \$19.95). All these books are available from Barclay Bridge Supplies (800) 274-2221; prices include shipping.

Zia was born in Pakistan but now lives in Manhattan and will represent the United States in next month's world championships in Bermuda. He is usually on the road