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AN IMPOSSIBLE POET, ASTONISHING THEATER

Creatively 'Catching' Everette Maddox at Ashé

Friday, May 26, 2006

By David Cuthbert
 Theater writer

To judge by "Catching Him in Pieces," the barroom poet Everette Maddox was a wondrous wastrel; an impossible, infuriating captain of his own increasingly leaky ship, a bathtub bard who insisted that poetry was his subversive response to life and yet went for years without writing one.

An Alabamian, he loved his adopted city of New Orleans because of its faults, not despite them, just as he demanded that people accept him as he was, and not as they wanted him to be. "The dream of New Orleans seems to be receding," he wrote, "it seems increasingly unreal. Or am I the one who's unreal?"

"We're a city on stilts -- what's holding it up?" One might ask the same of Maddox, who rejected responsibility and respectability and yet dressed like a Southern gentleman, drank like a fish, disdained change, sympathized "with Huck Finn's taste for the mixed-up" and gloried in "cruising down the river on a Sunday afternoon." Preferably with a good book. All he asked for was "a front row seat to watch the Titanic go down."

Maddox, who died in 1989 at the age of 44, is in the great tradition of self-destructive American artists: souses and screw-ups who lurch to the beat of their own drummer.

One of the ironies here is that Mondo Bizarro, a group of young artists who identify with Maddox, and yet manage to hold down teaching jobs, as he did only briefly, have created compelling, unconventional theater from this messy life. They have dramatized themes in his work in a dazzling display of coordinated creativity on every level: performance, movement and design. They catch him in pieces of his poetry and vignettes that challenge his purview, allowing him to answer in his own words and giving him the last ones.

It's a smart thing to do when your subject is endlessly quotable:

-- "You go your whole life pretending you're on a meaningful, purposeful endeavor, but in the end you're just killing time. The show goes on without you."

-- "Probably alcoholism can be cured. I doubt the artistic temperament can."

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-- "When you live your life differently, people take notice. Most people don't know what it is to find any meaning in life. Everyday is an awkward stumble chasing someone else's dreams. But if you know what you want in life, if you fall, you know who you are when you get to the bottom."

Director J Hammons choreographs those stumbles and falls in stylized, slo-mo tumbles, which usually end with Maddox's butt in the air. Books are slammed about for emphasis, pages torn out, arranged, perused and then gathered up like storm debris. In the Huck Finn sequence, there is an underwater swimming scene that is simply beautiful.

The nautical leitmotif that runs through Maddox's work is embodied in Jeff Becker's extraordinary, movable set that is at once a bar, library, prop room and an apartment with curtains, which billow into sails as this particular "piece" becomes a boat or ship.

One cannot imagine a better Maddox than Nick Slie. He's a sturdier version of the original, but has the same Byronic good looks and startling eyes, and carries himself with a woozy dignity, always tucking in his shirt, smoothing down his hair, rearranging himself after one of his falls or gutter crawls. His Maddox is romantically, maddeningly irredeemable.

Bruce France plays the audience -- in the person of bartender Jim, who admires but provokes Maddox. He's also a seventh-grade student, cautionary college friend Fred, Huck Finn and "Gatsby's" Nick Carraway, bringing to each total commitment and the sorcery of slipping seamlessly from one persona to the next.

The plaintive piano music is by Pez Wilson, the inventive lighting by Hammons and Terrel Robinson.

"Catching Him in Pieces" is astonishingly good.

'CATCHING HIM IN PIECES'

What: Mondo Bizarro presents an original play based on the life and poetry of Everette Maddox, directed by J Hammons.

Where: Ashé Cultural Center, 1712 Oretha Castle Haley Blvd.

When: Tonight, Saturday, Wednesday, Thursday and June 1-2 at 8;

Sunday and June 4 at 7.

Tickets: \$10; Thurs is pay-what-you-will.

Call: (504) 304-7855.

Nick Slie, above, is poet Everette Maddox and Bruce France is the prow of his ship and everybody else, in Mondo Bizarro's 'Catching Him in Pieces' at the Ashé Cultural Center.

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