THE ARTS

THEATER PREVIEW

Ethnographic Museum of Irrelevant Races
Highly Relevant

By Fred Choi

Presented by Dramashop
Directed by Brenda Coto-Escaler, Guillermo Gomez-Pelu, and Leticia Nieto
Exhibits developed by Parama Chattopadhyay '02, Richard Chen '02, Thomas Cork '99, Talia Kingsbury '99, Holly Kosisky, Malena Mayorga, and Rani Matuk '02.

I t is difficult to imagine another exhibit, whether within a museum context or not, that is as simultaneously disturbing and moving as that which is showcased in the Ethnographic Museum of Irrelevant Races, located in Little Kresse (36 Massachusetts Avenue) at MIT. According to the museum the mission of the EMIR is to “catalog and present relics of race and civilization dating from the beginning of time to the present, as well as ‘living specimens’ and their unique artifacts,” and to “preserve, interpret, and articulate these relics and specimens in their proper cultural, social, and economic contexts, and in a manner that causes the viewer to rethink and question how aspects of the world we live in are represented and manipulated.”

It is to the great credit of the museum’s co-directors, visiting professor Guillermo Gomez-Pelu, MIT Faculty Member Brenda Coto-Escaler, and special consultant Leticia Nieto, that the museum fulfills its mission to the fullest and produces a riveting, and at times cathartic experience like none other.

Upon entering the Ethnographic Museum of Irrelevant Races one is immediately drawn to MIT Faculty Member William Fregosi’s amazing design. The stage of Little Kresse has been transformed beyond recognition to house the interactive “living diorama,” which forms the central part of the Museum. In addition, the designers of the exhibits (Fregosi, as well as MIT Faculty members Leslie Cocuzzo-Held and Karen Perlow and Dramashop member Yvonne Hernandez ‘01) have taken extraordinary pains to provide authentically settings for the relics and living specimens, going so far as to create magnificent Mayan ceremonial garb and a rotating platform for use in pole dancing. All of these ideas are skillfully implemented by the exhibit fabrication team, headed by MIT Faculty members Michael Katz and Diane Branned.

As admirable and complete as the elements of the settings are, however, it is the living specimens themselves that are so captivating. The seven specimens range widely in character, from the DJ Arab Menace (Arabian maximus faciosus), who “un[s] ... traditional Arab hospitality as a tool of seduction,” to La Puta de Guadalupe (virginus purificatus kinaetica), a “temperamental idol” who accepts offerings and sometimes “fulfills the wishes of her supplicants.”

Although one’s initial emotions in regard to the specimens are of pity at seeing a fellow human in a cage or enchanted, these feelings are quickly replaced by deeper, more visceral emotions, such as confusion, fascination, and amusement, and in some cases fear, disgust, and even resentment. But in all cases it is impossible not to feel compassion towards this collection of tortured beings. They are, of course, not tortured by the museum staff who cares for them, but by the inner conflicts they express externally and which viewers can experience from the vantage point of visitors to the exhibit. As co-director Brenda Coto-Escaler explains, “in today’s American society ... we live as fragmented beings” and the selection of specimens for the exhibit clearly and somewhat dispassionately reflects these contemporary feelings of despair, disillusionment, and rage.

The exhibit development team, comprised of Dramashop members Parama Chattopadhyay ‘02, Richard Chen ‘02, Thomas Cork ‘99, Talia Kingsbury ‘99, Holly Kosisky, Malena Mayorga, and Rani Matuk ‘02, deserves strong commendation for its successful efforts in caring for their live specimens and bringing them forward for us to scrutinize.

In addition, the guards, Sloan Kiper ‘03 and Dora Kelle ‘03, are adept at anticipating trouble and ensuring that the specimens are watched closely, and are often available to answer questions about the exhibit. The Assistant Director of the Museum, Atand Sarwatte ‘01, and Dramashop members Holly Kosisky and Brandy Evans ‘01, are knowledgeable and helpful in providing information to the visitors not included on the sometimes convoluted placards which accompany each specimen in the exhibit. The docents also carefully monitor the interactions which occur, at first tentatively, between visitors and the specimens. The visitors tend to become more confident in their interactions as they get to know the docents, and they begin to discover that the specimens are not as foreign as they might have believed initially, as we all share a common humanity. These discoveries and others like them are ultimately what make the visit to this museum so powerful and affecting, and ultimately satisfying; this is definitely an event which must be experienced by all.

Also included in the Museum are a gift shop and video presentations which introduce visitors to “radical interpretations of culture based on race, hegemonic principles, covert ideology, and social construction.” The Museum’s hours are February 4, 5, 7, from 7-8:30, and 9-11; February 6, from 1-2:30, and from 3-4:30. The prices are $6 for students/senior citizens and $8 for the general public for each one and a half hour showing. Due to the adult content in some of the exhibits parental discretion is advised. For additional information, visit http://emir.mit.edu/.

JAMES GRAND, THE TECH

"CANTABRIDGIAN REDNECK EXILE" (Holly Koolsky)