

ATW Review - Mac's *Ladies* and *Be(a)st*, Amuse and Provoke, Individually or In Tandem

By Andy Propst on Jul 25, 2008

Maybe Taylor Mac, who's currently performing two shows in rep at the newly renovated HERE Arts Center, should think about getting a publishing deal like Auntie Mame envisioned for her memoirs. "I see them boxed – like Proust" she said. Or at least something to that effect. The reason I say this is that in *The Young Ladies Of...* and *The Be(a)st of Taylor Mac* - a sort of retrospective collage from multiple Mac plays – you'll find a haunting, hilarious, and sometimes hypnotic, exploration of a search for connection. "Ladies" and "Be(a)st" are companion pieces to be sure, each informing the other, and really are best savored in tandem. Hence, the potential need for boxing any printed versions.

In "Ladies," Taylor attempts to learn more about his father, who was killed in a motorcycle accident when the performer was just four years old. Mac's primary conduit to his dad are the letters that the elder man received while he was fighting in Vietnam. Mac's father had placed a personal ad in an Australian paper, looking for a woman with whom he could share his "R&R" time. Now from the letters, Taylor can backtrack into his dad's likes and dislikes – dancing and surfing among them – based on what the women write. He finds their openness and vulnerability difficult to reconcile with his own impressions of his father: a gruff and coarse man whose favorite move was Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Carousel*. (Mac assumes that his dad identified with the wife-beater hero of the musical, carny barker Billy Bigelow.

The connection that Mac, the women in the letters and Mac's dad look for in "Ladies" is echoed in "Be(a)st," which is an amalgam of segments from shows that he has performed around the country and abroad, primarily in the years following 9/11. Here, a manic song – decrying the fear that permeated the country in the weeks and months following the attacks on the World Trade Center – is also a panicked cell phone call about the items that were on many people's contingency plan lists. Another song – less manic, but also performed on the ukulele that never seems to be far from

the performer's side – is a litany of the names of the men (some abusive and some cruel) that Mac has loved. Again, it's all about trying to establish some sort of human and humane connectivity in the world.

What's probably most impressive about the shows is the way in which they tackle much broader issues – globalization, homogenization, and gender roles. As Mac lights on these subjects – directly or obliquely – the warmth that underlies the pieces, and Mac's, by turns, pixie-like and tough-broad performance, transforms to a kind of chilly heat, which can be invigoratingly lacerating. It's powerful and intoxicating stuff – particularly when performed by a man whose face is covered in white makeup that's accented with red, silver and green glitter, and whose slim body is draped in various pieces of drag finery that have been distressed to the almost to the point of disintegration.

David Drake directed "Be(a)st" and Tracy Trevett "Ladies". They ensure that each play has an appropriately, and sometimes disarmingly, conversational and almost improvisational feel. In "Ladies," the free-wheeling nature of Mac's performance belies the piece's clearly defined throughline: his need for closure with his father-issues. In "Be(a)st," however, the randomness to the pieces – despite some clever segues – can become problematic as the play flits from one moment to the next.

This small stumbling point does not, however, diminish the impact of "Be(a)st," which informed and complemented by "Ladies" is just one-half of an exceptional pair of plays that look not only at our need for connection, but also the societal and governmental impediments in the 21st century to being closer to one another.

---- Andy Propst