

Door as Stage

Salt Theater's Emma Griffin looks for answers in her Fringe production of Kaufman and Ferber's 1936 *Stage Door*, a play about 20 ingenues loving and hating the theater.

By Kirk Wood Bromley

For Emma Griffin, Artistic Director of the newly formed Salt Theater Company, the stage is a door through which we pass in order to answer questions. When asked why she founded her theater company, she responds: "It is an attempt to create for myself an environment where I can work on figuring out what is interesting, subtle, vital and energizing about the relationship between actor and audience." This was something she sought in *Inky* (by Rinne Groff), Salt's premier and most recent show, and now with her new show, *Stage Door*, appearing as a work-in-progress in the Fringe (and as a full production in January, 2001, at HERE), she opens another door.

Several aspects of the production of *Stage Door* lend themselves to Emma's theoretical journey. To begin with, the play itself is "a dazzling and bizarre extravaganza about a boarding house full of young actresses hopelessly...desperately...fatally in love with the theater." Written in 1936 by George S. Kaufman and Edna Ferber, it was originally conceived as being performed by twenty ingenues, though the authors ended up adding seven male parts for good measure. As Griffin says, "the play concerns people with a super high romantic idealism about theater. Their love for theater is very passionate and earnest."

Of course, times have changed for most theater actors. Yet *Stage Door*, according to Griffin, foreshadows this change as well - "One of the major themes in the play is this total ambivalence - love, hate and envy - for film, which in my mind is super modern. Every actor I know is going through that." So not only does the play deal with the enthusiasts of theater, but it deals with its enemies as well.

Even this particular production serves Griffin's investigation. Though Salt Theater's core group of artists is composed of designers (Mark Barton on lights, Alexander Dodge on costumes, Noah Scalin on sound and graphics, and Louisa Thompson on costumes) with whom Griffin has collaborated a number of times, this particular show has almost no design. Why? "In the pressed downtown rehearsal and production time of the Fringe - you have 15 minutes to move in, it's summer, it's hot, there's a million shows, it's very young and downtown - none of us were making good decisions for the show. So 27 actors running around in high heels and lipstick in a workshop of a play that's about being in love with theater is a way to trick it. But on top of the constraint issues, I wanted a chance to work on a show with a deeper dialogue with actors." So here is classic Griffin: both attaining a high entertainment level and discovering something crucial about the collaborative process of theater.

And the line between the ideas about theater in the play and the ideas about theater that this production's 27 actors have is constantly crossed - "Another thing that was appealing to me was the way that people in this play talk about theater speaks very much to the way in which people do theater below 14th Street, because you have to have that kind of anguished devotion for it,

since really there's not much reward." In other words, this is a play about actors talking about theater in hard times performed by actors who talk about theater that is going through hard times. Many find such self-referential loopiness exhilarating about Griffin's work.

Griffin's history leads well to the type of abstract adventures into play, image and word that her company seems to represent. She has worked closely with Target Margin and Tiny Mythic, both known for their deconstructionist bents, and Inverse Theater, known for its language bent. Griffin is moving beyond both of these training systems, however. For one, she is less interested in deconstruction than she is in the object itself - "David (Herskovits - Artistic Director of Target Margin) has a fascination with the traveling of deconstructive theoretical ideas through a show and I have a fascination with a more immediate physicality of those ideas. I want to know why the object itself is unique, interesting, and engaging." And while her plays do involve language as a key element, for Griffin "theater is primarily a visual art-form." This explains why she is well known in the downtown community for her ability to create intriguing stage pictures.

So where does all this leave us in terms of understanding Salt Theater and of answering whether or not to see *Stage Door* in the Fringe? As far as seeing the show, I can say from experience that Griffin's productions are always fast, ferocious, elegant, humorous, and curious. And as far as the essence of Salt Theater, one might say that it is, ironically enough, an attempt to discover theater after irony. In fact, Griffin's choice of *Stage Door* was designed specifically to avoid the irony that, she feels, too often imbues modern plays - "It's an interesting play to me because there is no irony. There's witticisms and funny bits, but it doesn't have that self-referential strain that we are used to. So I got interested in the question 'Can you do a play without irony? Will it hold up? Will it be schmaltsy? Will it be a joke?'" See the show and let Emma know.