





The Fartiste

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nytheatre.com review

Tim Cusack · Aug 13, 2006

"Art isn't easy," Stephen Sondheim famously observed in *Sunday in the Park with George*, his musical drama about the great French pointillist painter Georges Seurat, and Sondheim was very much in mind while watching Charlie Schulman and Michael Roberts's dramatization of the life of the French music hall performer Joseph Pujol. Like the divine Stevie, the creators of this musical biography are invested in examining the life of a misapprehended genius, mapping out the ways in which his highly idiosyncratic vision clashes with the realities of life. And coincidentally in both pieces, the professions of artist, who feeds the soul, and baker, who feeds the body, are set in opposition to each other. The problem is Sondheim chose as his subject an artist whose importance no one would now dispute. Schulman and Roberts, on the other hand, have made the decision to devote considerable time and creative effort to memorializing a man who could "expel an almost infinite quantity of odorless gas" from his anus in a controlled fashion—in other words, a "fartiste." This leaves the audience in an impossible position—unable to take Pujol's "work" seriously, it becomes harder and harder to sympathize with his desperation to be recognized as a classical musician as the show progresses.

Which isn't to say that *The Fartiste* is without its charms: Deftly sketching Pujol's life in Paris (he started as a baker in Marseilles and returned to that profession upon his retirement from the Moulin Rouge), the creators have cannily set the entire action in that infamous Montmartre nightclub. Inventively staged by John Gould Rubin using cane-backed chairs and little else, the story of Pujol's rise from obscurity to the heights of celebrity follows the classic show-biz trajectory, except in this case it's wittily danced by a chorus of can-can girls (choreography by Richard Move) and narrated by Aristide Bruant (the excellent Nick Wyman). Leaving his bourgeois wife (Rebecca Kupka) behind, Pujol arrives in Paris and auditions for Charles Zidler (Jim Conti), the Moulin Rouge's owner. Pujol convinces the businessman to give him a spot on the next evening's bill. Needless to say, he slays

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Charlie Schulman &
Michael Roberts

Director

John Gould Rubin

Producer

The Private Theater
Corp at the New York
International Fringe
Festival

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the audience (quite literally), thus birthing a new star from his anal canal. Fending off the attentions of La Goulue, the nightclub's leading chanteuse (the spirited Lyn Philistine), he manages to remain faithful to his wife, while becoming the biggest draw in all of France.

And then he blows everything on a pretentious act of hubris. Or rather, the cold, cruel world of show business crushes this original's artistic dream. It's kind of hard to know exactly what the creators' position is on all of this. The final number exhorting the audience to follow our dreams like Pujol only further confuses matters: develop a freakish skill and then exploit it for all it's worth? devote oneself to the lifelong perfection of an art form, regardless of financial success? become a successful entrepreneur and have lots of children and a doting wife? Who knows, since any of these possibilities could apply to the title character.

What isn't confusing if the consummate skill of the cast—all of whom are uniformly excellent. But the evening undisputedly belongs to Kevin Kraft and Steven Scott. Kraft provides the hilarious contortions and earnest, unsmiling demeanor of Pujol; Scott contributes the equally hilarious sound effects on microphone. Together they turn a one-joke character into an endless source of delight.

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