

An Evening in Hell



by Phyllis Chesler

Last night I left my work to go downtown—to Hell. Traffic crawled, car noise-music blared—even the neon lights seemed to blink too loudly. The streets seemed filled with party-goers. Was it a slow motion parade or a Mardi Gras, perhaps an early Halloween fantasy? It was quite colorful and yet, so far from the 10th Avenue or the Broadway that I knew so well after World War Two. No sailor would be famously kissing that nurse now—remember that photograph? This was a more grotesque, cartoonish, version of itself, more garish, so bright it seemed like midday not evening.

And then—the Longacre Theater was not “fit for purpose” as the Brits might say. If I were 30 or 40 years younger and not at all disabled, (I use a walker and a cane, no big deal but apparently I don’t belong at the Longacre). The lines, (oh the

lines!), and the winding, endless number of stairs required to get to the bathroom, and the cramped little seats with so little leg room. The seat I purposely chose was on an aisle, and this meant that I had to mount an odd little step up and try to position myself—somehow. Alright. One is supposed to pay a price for Art, Culture, and the story of the Jews in Vienna. And then, just as the curtain went up, two latecomers pushed their way into my row, the man pinching, then crushing my legs because there was simply no room for one, not to mention for two people and, in the dark, I had to get down and out and back into the aisle. We actually exchanged very cross words. He said something like: “Goddammit, I paid for these seats too, get out of my way,” and I said something like, “I’m not getting up for you, it’s just too hard...”

And then, the on-stage pageantry, the series of tableaux began. Here were Viennese Jews all talking in hoity-toity British accents, not a single German accent among them. It was getting hard to suspend disbelief, harder still when not everyone’s words could be understood. I tried sitting on the very edge of my seat and extending both legs out into the aisle but I was not only uncomfortable, I found myself less and less interested in the very sparkling words. I am sure this play was the most literate, most literary, most substantial play on the boards this season but it was too stagey for me, too much artifice and affectation.

I left after a half hour. I actually left the Vienna that I’ve visited and to my surprise, liked so much. I felt that I’d once lived there; perhaps I did. But I left. My seat was near the back, so I slipped out very quietly.

The best was yet to come. Out on the street, waiting for a car, I flipped through the Playbill. Almost every actor, singer, dancer, costume designer, or choreographer featured was a man of color, a drag queen (a man), a trans-woman (a man), someone “queer” and/or “non-binary” (one man, one woman). Lesbians (women) have been as swiftly disappeared from

view as were the Jews of Vienna. But I quibble. Macy's paid for an ad which featured two unnamed lesbians—not theater women. And there *are* two actresses (among about fifteen featured) who are women and since they were not identified as “gay” or “queer,” one may dare assume that they are “heterosexual.” Too shameful to admit? Or is heterosexuality now the default for all things racist and as such, shameful? Better left unmentioned.

Life in the fast lane, trying to slow down.