Review "All Mixed Up" As presented by Mickee Faust Club Tallahassee, Florida

By Gaylen Ross

I came to the Mickee Faust Club as an outsider both to the Tallahassee theater community and to their particular theater for the "weird community" as it is selfdescribed. The latter I understood to be anyone who is looking at the world or the world looking at them from a different angle. My initiation was as an invited guest by Florida State University and the Mickee Faust Club to preview the documentary film I am completing on the theater actress Caris Corfman. Caris was a graduate of the Yale School of Drama among a distinguished group of alumni including Kate Burton, Tony Shaloub and playwright and comedian Lewis Black. Having gone straight from school to Broadway (Caris's first New York role was in the original production of *Amadeus*) she had a distinguished career in theater and film for many years. Until one day she was diagnosed with a brain tumor and in its removal, she lost her short term memory. In that moment Caris crossed the line from abled to disabled, and so incapacitated that she lost the ability to perform. Or so everyone thought. Ten years of rehabilitation and incredible determination resulted in Caris returning to the stage, finding a way not only to reclaim her life and her place in the theater, but to do so to critical acclaim including a full page feature article in the New York Times. The documentary is the chronicle of that journey, and most importantly, a voice for Caris – that people understand not only the difficulties she had to overcome, but her demand to be respected and heard, ".....I miss freedom. In the course of an operation, I went from being independent to helpless. ... Suddenly, I am being told what to do and when to do it and with whom. I have no choice in matters. Others make choices for me. I am treated like a misbehaving child, which ignites my anger and frustrates me more. ... People forget. I am not a misbehaving child; I am a confused adult."

Bringing the film as a work in progress to Florida State University, and receiving the commentary from academics and theater community was important. But the most informed contribution came from many of the members of the Mickee Faust Club who face their own disabilities. Listening to their response to Caris' story and its interpretation on the screen, relating it to their experiences, theater writing and performance proved invaluable. This was more than realized when viewing the two hour cabaret show presented by the Club entitled *All Mixed Up*.

All Mixed Up is a collection of often raunchy, over the top, in your face skits as the best of cabaret should be. The fact that many of the pieces were performed and written by disabled members of the Club added another layer of theatricality and meaning. It was not just entertainment but intensely political, sometimes confrontational, sometimes assaultive theater with humor and an edge. There was no 'sympathy' vote here for weirdness – what was different among the theater members and the community was held up to be parodied, joked about, but never to be apologized for.

The first and most significant character is Mickee him/herself who acts as a rodent Joel Grey played by Terry. Mickey sets up the evening, in the rat's outrageous style and attitude, breaking the fourth wall, as a good host should do. Terry is deaf though that is not part of the performance, and one would not guess nor care from the hysterical and manic nightmare clown she portrays. The point is well taken – like us or leave us, this is entertainment, this is shocking, this is fun, and if in the enjoyment of the evening you leave with a new perspective, new way of looking at the world, it is not because you as an audience are being lectured to, or played an emotional hand, but as a byproduct of cabaret mirth. There will be nothing warm and fuzzy here — certainly not with this mouse.

Actually the evening begins even before the show in the welcoming backyard garden site, with a pre-theater concert. The toe tapping folk music, food and drink offer a gathering place for friends and audience members to meet and feel part of this community. It is a kind of a happening, and you get a sense that the evening will already be "different" with its wheelchair friendly environment and the democratic meeting ground of disabled and abled. There is no sense of entitlement nor its counterpart, disenfranchisement. It's unlike any pre-theater experience I've witnessed.

What is clear as the evening proceeds, is the very notion of deconstructing the traditional idea of disability or the 'other.' The outsider (or weird) here is whatever popular culture has determined as different and therefore discardable. To be shelved or fringed, essentially erased from mainstream dialogue. It could be senior citizens having sex as in the monologue of "Re-imagining Stephen Foster" or the naked body revealed by a less than youthful woman in "The First Time My Husband." Images that are normally hidden and connected with shame and guilt become part of the theatricality and rather than make an appeal, the writing demands our attention and intelligence.

One of my favorite pieces, and the most sophisticated is "Drive by Healing" – a satire about religious do-gooders wanting to cure the performer of his cerebral palsy. In the near physical attack by the zealots who cannot heal him but actually instill real terror in their charity, society at large is held up to the mirror of misguided 'helper" – self involved, narcissistic, refusing to acknowledge the very object of their rescue mission. To top off the message, it is well performed and written, funny, biting -- the best kind of cabaret skit.

Among the 'otherness' profiled in the evening are issues of transgender, race (a monologue about Blackness, womanhood, and Afro American Hair in "Hair Story" and even weight – "The D Diet." One real reversal of stereotype was the surprise striptease of men auditioning for racy club dancing, and the very eager audition candidate who gleefully disrobes to his very ageing but still willing male body.

Lots of good-humored jokes and songs about sex, menstruation and menopause - and indignities in a skit titled aptly "Dignity" – a paralyzed woman in a hospital subjugated to a tampon insertion by not so well meaning nurses, and the nightmare of healthcare in "Getcher Free Health Care."

Throughout the skits are augmented by clever animations both as interludes or backdrop projections. There is dance, one especially beautiful African piece called "Amber's Dance."

If there is a criticism to the cabaret its that in the probable desire to include as many performers and writers in the evening, there is too much of all. Some of the jokes and skits seem repetitious even if they are not. The optimum would be to have two nights back to back - evening A and B, alternating the program, so that the length would be reduced and the variety might have more impact.

The evening ends with a celebratory chorus line style Zombie rag "I Feel Dead" danced and sung by performers who have made it clear throughout the evening that they are anything but dead, nor dismissible.