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TIME

Friday, Feb. 10, 1967

Theater: Blood Pudding

Belech, by Rochelle Owens. Whether bright or dim, there are more lights in the theatrical firmament than those that gleam on the marquees on Broadway or off. Last week Philadelphia was host to a new drama of serious intent. As the playgoer enters the Theater of the Living Arts, he hears a soundtrack from nature as raucous and insidious as the din of city traffic. Cockatoos screech and hippopotamuses snort. Over the stage stretch tangled plastic vines. On the walls are murky film blowups of lions, elephants and monkeys. A combination of bamboo palace and automobile graveyard, the set is a raked topography of danger, containing in one scene a Daliesque montage of severed human legs.

Savage is as savage seems, for this is a play in one of drama's contemporary styles, "the theater of cruelty." Belech (pronounced Bek-lek) is fuzzy, occasionally shallow and boring, but it is also a gory blood pudding of a play oozing violence.

The plot is silly-surreal. A white U.S. she wolf named Belech (Sharon Gans) becomes the vampire queen of an African tribe. She is a voracious, paganly sadistic earth mother; her husband (Jerome Dempsey) is an earthworm. To secure her rise to power, she coaxes him into contracting elephantiasis, which the natives regard as a symbol of regal divinity. He is a king in name and pain only, as she promptly betrays him with a kind of virility totem, a bare-torsoed American from Marlbrando country. Deserted by this lover at play's end, the white queen faces beheading by the tribe.

In her first full-length stage work, Playwright Owens, a 30-year-old Manhattan housewife, seesaws insecurely between the scenic jungle onstage and the psychic jungle in 20th century man. Apparently beginning as a psychological probe of modern woman's instinct for the male jugular, Belech ends as a form of social parable on black Africa's expulsion of cruel, exploiting whites. Liberally scatological in its language, the play uses four-letter words as fashionable credentials. They seem to show that the author can spit the raw verbal gristle of experience at the audience coolly, and strictly for laughs.

Much of what happens is strictly not for laughs. Beclch clouts a small boy to death in the anguished presence of the child's mother. She decapitates a young goat, and gnaws on the animal's entrails with her lips dripping blood. All this is meant to confound, amaze, and dismay, to dramatize the central dictum of Antonin Artaud, the French pioneer of this type of theater who said: "Everything that acts is a cruelty."

Despite Beclch's dramatic flaws, the evening thrums with dithyrambic vitality whenever the Afro-American Dance Ensemble takes over the stage. Much of the sensual intensity generated by the play stems from Andre Gregory's flamboyant direction, which not only teases but strips. A Negro-white twosome sweatily mimic copulation in the theater aisle, and some of the African maidens could pass for topless in their transparent flesh-tinted bras.

Presented for a limited run, Beclch was violently opposed by some of the theater's board of trustees. If this kind of play remained in the repertory, wrote two lady trustees, the theater would shortly be filled only with "junkies, delinquents, potential suicides and some college kids." Possibly. On the other hand, while Beclch is undoubtedly abrasive, many a first play of the past has made its name as much by the playgoers it has driven out of the theater as by those it lured in.

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