

James Barth

541 BROADWAY

Aces and Eights by James Barth immediately recalls Yvonne Rainer's *This Is The Story of a Woman Who . . .* One reason is because of the way in which *Aces and Eights* weaves a loosely drawn narrative web by means of several distinct modes and techniques of representation—dance, writing, speaking, photomontage as well as tape-recorded monologues, songs, and music.

The shift from one medium to another, say from movement to printed slide or from spoken monologue to printed slide, is often psychologically motivated—the slide standing for a thought of the character/performer or his alter-ego. The way Barth organizes this material emphasizes that his various narrative media are distinct.

For instance, movement may be arrested when a printed slide is projected. Attention is then drawn to the specificity of the slide as a device, and a battery of simultaneous articulations does not prevent perception of the narrative moment over and above the specific devices that constitute it. Not predisposed to the *gesamkunstwerk* ideology, Barth emphasizes the visibility rather than the invisibility of the narrative support. Here, an analogy might be struck with Godard in that Barth is mixing media by means of juxtaposition rather than synthesis, thus evolving a kind of narrative collage.

To the degree that collage is a basic organizing strategy in *Aces and Eights*, tension between the various modes of representation becomes an esthetic ground for invention. For example, the piece culminates with a parody of *The Best of Groucho*, itself a parody of TVquiz shows. This parody is articulated by means of two major elements. Barth, wearing glasses and intermittently humming “Hooray for Capt. Spaulding,” stands, generally frozen, in the center of the performance area. He represents Groucho. He interviews two guests, a man, represented by a midget mannequin dressed like Barth/Groucho, and then a woman, represented solely by a pair of high heel shoes. The interview itself transpires through printed slides—Groucho is the slide on the west wall; the successive guests are the successive slides on the south wall. As one reads the dialogue, head turning from one side of the room to the other, one sweeps over the performing space from right to left, with each cross passing over the arrested tableau of Groucho and guest which is “actively” represented in the slide dialogue. The organization is canny. The mimetic reference, spatially exaggerating the distance between the slide-voices, provokes a humorous recognition of that perceptual process of conversation by which we turn from one speaker to the next.

Aces and Eights proceeds through a journey from Ignorance (Barth's home town) across the Great Plain. This journey is inscribed through a highly directional interpretation of the performance space. Movements are often about going somewhere (suitcase in hand) or about having one's path blocked.

The performance area is strikingly articulated. The border between the audience and actor is a white, taut strip of tape, slightly elevated off the floor, and drawn diagonally across the

southeast/northwest axis of the room. The broader end of this trapezoid is separated from the narrowing portion by means of two tape hash marks, one extending from the wall to the middle of the trapezoid, and the other extending from the center to the western border of the figure. These lines are discontinuous and parallel, thus shaping a passageway between the broadside of the figure and the narrower side. On the broadside, there is a white circle of kitty litter as well as a shelf on the wall; the narrow side is bare. The overall composition readily evokes the theme of borders.

The narration on the printed slides is packed with puns and Parmenidean paradoxes—literary correlates of explicit themes of doubt and uncertainty. This articulation is matched with movement full of hesitancy and constraint. Barth walks toward one of the hash mark boundaries, stops, begins to walk over it, hesitates, sways back and forth in his decision. Or, he walks out of the broadside section of the trapezoid, blindfolded, slowly feeling his way along the tape with his foot until he reaches the passageway to the narrower side. Balancing verbal doubt and uncertainty with kinetic hesitancy and constraint, Barth is evolving a coherent image of the obsessive-compulsive character. One brilliant image occurs when Barth stands precariously on a narrow wall-ledge in the beam of the slide projector. He walks back and forth, pressed near to the wall, all his movements hugging inward rather than thrusting out from the shelf. Constraint and muscular tension as well as the psychological overtones of being on a precipice are revealed.

By flashing the slide of a giant foot over his head, Barth intensifies this image. He crouches; the foot lowers. Gradually he lies on the shelf, the foot ever lower. This recalls the disproportionate scales of Ernst and Magritte and emphasizes the obsessive-compulsive imagery by the thematic addition of burden, weight, and, by dramatization, depression.

The forcefulness of this segment, moreover, has further echoes. In a double-paneled photomontage, Barth dreams that he leaves his apartment. He pauses at the window overlooking Canal Street. The photography emphasizes the ledge. He jumps. At first, this seems to retrospectively explicate the earlier symbolism of the ledge in terms of suicide. He lands, however, not crushed, for the photography idealizes his fall into a leap from which he rises in a virtually continuous movement. Thus, via montage, Barth suggests both suicide and invulnerability, thereby traversing the obsessive-compulsive polarity of depression and omnipotence.

One is confronted with a putative narrative journey which is not unified by an action or an interrelated action series. Rather, there seems to persist a unity based on a retrospectively emerging coherence of disparate sections, linked thematically as successive images of self-expression. That is, *Aces and Eights* appears to be a carefully structured series of personal symbols of obsessive compulsion.

— *Noel Carroll*