

Busched and Ambushed in *The Third Story*

Charles Busch delves deep in narrative

By Michael Feingold
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The Third Story
By Charles Busch

A woman who loves telling stories has a child, and thereby hangs not just one tale, but a great many of them, elaborately and complexly tangled together. The forest of narrative is dark, and its paths are twisted. At least so things are in the magical world of Charles Busch, whose narrative forest gets deeper and more mysterious as he ventures further along its unexplored byways.

Busch used to invent simple old-movie spoofs, spiced with the self-awareness of a contemporary drag performer. But old-movie spoofs, in and of themselves, grow stale, and questing artists with Busch's imagination don't settle for that. Under the cinema stereotypes lie their literary prototypes; under those, the mythic archetypes: The superficial or Disney version is only a modern American child's point of entry to something darker, richer, and more universal. Some astonishing zigzags lie on the seemingly short, straight road from Anaheim to Bettelheim.

Busch's new play, *The Third Story*, now being presented by Manhattan Class Company at the Lortel, is the simple tale of Peg (Kathleen Turner), an old gal who loves telling stories, and her son, Drew (Jonathan Walker), nurtured on her stories and now struggling to live his own. Both have worked as screenwriters in Hollywood, but it's 1950 or thereabouts, and things have changed: She's washed up, alcoholic, and maybe a potential blacklistee; he's sick of the racket, eager for normality, and pursuing a dreary day job in Omaha while trying to restore connections to his father and his ex-wife. When Peg invades his home in quest of a writing partner, you can imagine that normality is the last thing Drew gets.

Instead, we get to watch while mom builds, with son's half-reluctant help, a Dagwood-sandwiched pile of genre stories that melt into, and comment on, each other. A noirish gangster flick with a chic female mobster for flavor turns into a Douglas Sirk weeper when the mobsterette's doting son brings home a shady spouse, then morphs yet again, into a cheesy sci-fi flick about a female scientist with a knack for cloning. And hovering behind it all, like a recollection of the immigrant heritage most Americans decline to remember, is Drew's favorite bedtime story from childhood, Peg's jumbled revision of her Russian grandmother's old-country tale about a lovelorn princess who seeks out the witch Baba Yaga. Author Busch plays the lady mobster, naturally, and the witch; Walker doubles as the mobster son, Turner as the woman scientist's German-accented guru.

This is rich food; not surprisingly, palates accustomed to the thin gruel that today's theater too often serves up have grimaced at it. It's also let's face the fact, hearty peasant cuisine—a thick stew, the chewy ingredients and peppery flavor of which may not appeal to fastidious tastes. Nor is it dished up with much elegance: The designs have been conceived serviceably but without panache; Carl Andress's direction comes in, competently, just under the imaginative flair that gives such works sparkle.

The cast's likability partly makes up for these shortfalls: Jennifer Van Dyck embodies the monomaniac scientist with crisp comic authority; Turner's brassy energy is as delightful as her slurry diction is maddening (startlingly, it improves when she takes on the German accent). Walker is irresistibly charming as he lurches, like a bipedal shuttlecock, from lapsed screenwriter to Oedipally traumatized gangster; Sarah Rafferty makes his ambiguously wide-eyed doll and the woebegone Russian princess equally fetching. Busch's definitive gift for female haughtiness, whether sporting gangster haute couture or a massive gray fright wig larger than himself, needs no critic's confirmation.

The main joy of *The Third Story* is that its foolery embodies something substantive, making its occasional unevenness easy to bear. Like that good peasant food, it sticks to your ribs. Jung says somewhere that the psychic "work" accomplished by myths and fairy tales doesn't occur on the story's realistic, psychological, or allegorical level; it's in the energy created as our minds move among the three. No wonder *The Third Story* feels like such an energizing event.