

Psycho Beach Party

(the play)

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The Stage: 'Psycho Beach Party'

By STEPHEN HOLDE

Gidget Goes Berserk

CHARLES BUSCH's "Psycho Beach Party" is a comic trash compactor of a play that takes an already silly genre - early 1980's surf and beach blanket movies - and sends it to camp heaven.

Created by the writer-performer and his Theater-in-Limbo company who brought us "Vampire Lesbians of Sodom," Mr. Busch's new play fits squarely in the same mold of hectic drag comedy. But "Psycho Beach Party," at the Players Theater, is more solidly constructed than



Adam Newman
Charles Busch as a teen-age girl with a Jekyll-Hyde split personality in "Psycho Beach Party."

its forerunner, which is still running at the nearby Provincetown Playhouse. Where "Vampire Lesbians" cohered as a loose-jointed series of skits, "Psycho Beach Party" carries its amusing plot premise of a Gidget-like protagonist with a Jekyll-Hyde split personality through a dozen swift hairpin turns without losing its basic thread.

Mr. Busch brings an aura of cheerful, poker-faced clownishness to the role of Chicklet Forrest, a demure teen-age girl with a flat chest and a maniacal alter ego. When Chicklet's submerged psyche, Ann, announces herself, the stage lights flicker, Mr. Busch dazedly bats his eyes, and the simpering Chicklet metamorphoses into a voracious camp dragon dispensing commands in a Tallulah Bankhead basso profundo. Chicklet's dream is simply to have her own surfboard. The monstrous Ann wants nothing less than to become "dominatrix empress of the planet Earth."

The play gleefully defies logic as it subverts clean-cut Hollywood stereotypes. Kanaka (Ralph Buckley), the local surfing hero who won't give Chicklet the time of day, becomes Ann's

first groveling conquest, while Yo-Yo (Robert Carey) and Provoloney (Andy Halliday), Malibu Beach's prize beefcake, fall in love with each other in the middle of rehearsing a heterosexual seduction. Mr. Busch's dialogue offers an amusing pastiche of vintage hepcat slang and whiny love-comic-book clichés spiced with dashes of pure smut. The fun culminates in a denouement whose traumatic revelations are lifted directly from Alfred Hitchcock's "Marnie."

The production's coup de théâtre is the way it weaves images of Joan Crawford (in "Mildred Pierce," "Berserk!" and "Mommie Dearest") into a satirical subtext that ridicules outdated Hollywood notions of sex, psychiatry and motherhood. From the moment she swivels imperiously onto the stage to complain about how the veal scaloppini she was preparing for dinner exploded the pressure cooker, Meghan Robinson, who portrays Chicklet's domineering mother, steals the show with her uncannily accurate physical caricature of the late screen legend.

If Mr. Busch's brand of camp theater has grown in craft, it still lacks the high style and classical aspiration of Charles Ludlam's theater of the ridiculous. Right down to its insipid theme song, sung by Michael Maguire in a perfect parody of Jack Jones, to its surfside set of rotating cardboard waves to its Rorschach inkblot backdrop, "Psycho Beach Party" revels in trash for trash's sake.