

Parallel Obsessions

Los Angeles / David E. James

In his work of the early and mid-seventies, Guy de Cointet was concerned with the exploration and manipulation of language systems at the level of the letters themselves. His books and paintings of this period, consequently, had the appearance of coded material, puzzles that invited translation into ordinary language at the same time that their complexity and ultimate (?) undecodability resisted it. More recently, moving to drama, de Cointet has retained this duality but transposed it from the literal to the social. His new play *Five Sisters*, presented at the Municipal Art Gallery Theater in Barnsdall Park in September, was a comedy of manners which, like those old paintings, shimmered with the implication of meaning but persistently (though wittily) diverted the interpretative urge into colorful cul-de-sacs (lit with sophistication by Eric Orr).

Like its Chekhovian parent, on one level *Five Sisters* set bourgeois family tensions into motion in both psychological and social directions. The sisters — all sensitively acted — were precisely realized in the sunshine of Orange County obsession. As career women successful in a variety of businesses, they came complete and svelte in tasteful bodies, understated (but practical) couture and thoroughly contemporary neuroses. But other than their shared and overriding desire to stay so young

and beautiful (to which end their conversation circled around their different doctors and specialists and their various methods of retarding aging), they had little in common. Their energies moved in parallel rather than in series, directed not towards each other in mutual interaction, but towards goals which, like their men, were always somewhere off-stage. They could be hailed from the wings, but never concretely grasped or formulated.

In the isolation of their private obsessions — Maria's was the most interesting: since returning from an African vacation, she had been unable to tolerate the sun (which somewhat takes the edge off of living in Orange County) — the sisters did not so much converse as they juxtaposed their separate discourses, which were not only highly idiosyncratic, but typically appeared to be secondhand, recruited from somewhere else and therefore quoted rather than spoken. The sources of these private languages were varied (the most sublime was a quote from the *Complete Poems of Suzanne Sommers*), but generally derived from public sources of an impersonal and often commercial nature — travel brochures, newspapers, textbooks, etc. As a result, the play as a whole became a patchwork of overlapping codes, none of them sufficiently comprehensive or assertive to be able to free itself from the others and establish itself as normative. The play as a whole

was left, then, as a Babel of competing and mutually incomprehensible languages.

What this finally achieves — and here I think is where the play becomes especially interesting — is to undermine the ability of language to fix identity. Hence it undermines the possibility of identity itself. Rather than being something existing through different speeches and holding those speeches in its own constancy, identity becomes something fragmentarily grasped according to the terms of whatever dis-

course is immediately available. And since these discourses are always outside the individual, already existing (especially as one or another form of advertising), identity becomes the form of a momentary affiliation with one variety or other of Newspeak. Rather than speaking, the sisters are spoken, and therefore unable to discover themselves with any certainty in their own speech. As one of them summarily asked, "Is this me or is it a duplicate of me?" Only the Blade Runner knows for sure — and he's gone north. □



Guy de Cointet, "Five Sisters," play performed September 18, 1982, at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery Theater, Barnsdall Park, Los Angeles. Set, sound and lights by Eric Orr. (L-R) Jane Zingale, Helen Mendez, Peggy Margaret, Mary Ann Duganne. Photo: © 1982 Ave Pilvas.