POZ Picks

April 1, 1999

PICK OF THE LITTER

Chuck Nanney
April 1–May 1
Nick Debs Gallery, New York City

It's perfectly all right to be flip about Chuck Nanney's recent work. First of all, that will keep you from getting all sanctimonious about the relationship between Nanney's HIV status and titles like "reticent infection" and "silver artery plunge." And you'll understand why these gently mordant aerial acts of canvas "scrap," squiggled together with wire and book rings, can be described as, say, "Ellsworth Kelly gone Pee-Wee Herman" or "Geoffrey Beene come apart at the seams." Most important, though, flippancy—not humorless respect—is what this Tennessee-born artist's work gives off and seems to want in return. So go and give it, when the work alights on the walls of the two-year-old Chelsea gallery of one of Gotham's most open-eyed dealers, Nick Debs. You can also catch the up-and-coming artist at Galerie Jousse-Seguin in Paris and at a Visual AIDS exhibit, "Bodies of Resistance," in Hartford.

—Stephen Greco

BOOKS

The Encyclopedia of AIDS
Edited by Raymond A. Smith
Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers

What has 600 pages, 250 alphabetical entries and 181 contributors? The much-anticipated *Encyclopedia of AIDS*. Subtitled "A social, political, cultural and scientific record of the HIV epidemic," this ambitious reference book is strongest in the first three categories. Its scientific entries suffer from the necessary trade-off between depth and the convenience of a single-volume reference. The brevity of these entries, however, is countered with valuable suggestions for further reading.

Be warned: The book was organized in the pre-protease era. A single entry may cover multiple subjects that a more current critic might have treated separately, and vice versa. So, most notably, numerous opportunistic infections are detailed individually, but all the antiretroviral drugs

are discussed in one entry. And the copy can get dry: Anyone reading the mechanical entry on kissing would wonder why people do it, given that, although it presents little risk of transmitting HIV, it's so rich a source of bacteria and fungi.

But such faults are minor. On the whole, *The Encyclopedia of AIDS* is clear, informative and amazingly comprehensive. It touches on all aspects of the 19-year-old pandemic, journeying to the bedroom, the jail cell, the lab, the theater and the street. I recommend it also go on your shelf.

—Tom Keane

THEATER

The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told
Written by Paul Rudnick
Directed by Christopher Ashley
Minetta Lane Theater, New York City

A master of the one-liner, openly gay playwright and screenwriter Paul Rudnick (*Jeffrey, In & Out*) has few peers when it comes to withering put-downs and razor-sharp observations. There isn't a shortage of barbs (angels are "Prozac for poor people") in *The Most Fabulous Story Ever Told*, his new play, at Manhattan's Minetta Lane Theater through April 4.

In Rudnick's creation story, the original humans were Adam and Steve, a gay couple, and Jane and Mabel, a pair of lesbians. The men decorate, Mabel builds fences, and the four live contentedly for centuries before running into (gasp!) madly procreating heterosexuals. This causes our gay progenitors to question their belief in God, the meaning of family and more.

For all his characters' wit, Rudnick doesn't quite deliver. The final scene, set in a contemporary loft on Christmas Eve, dissolves into a soupy mix of *It's a Wonderful Life* and *The Boys in the Band*. Only at this point does Rudnick address AIDS. A jarring development in the midst of holiday festivities, the epidemic's entrance at least promises to bring the play to higher ground. But Rudnick lets it fall heavily, using the disease merely to sew up some loose ends regarding mortality and faith. Ultimately Rudnick's use of HIV seems forced, as though he thought he couldn't write a play about today's New York without tossing off a viral subplot.

—Jeff Hoover

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