



- New York
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## Enchantment on Lower First Avenue

Monday, August 22nd, 2011

by Alix Cohen

We're met at the top of a stairway to the basement by the elfin Deborah Kaufmann in a green taffeta Victorian dress and a derby. A third of our small group is given flashlights to be shone on "the action." The theater contains a dozen folding chairs and a metal table-the stage. It's intimate and pitch dark. Only our modern day lanterns emit light- on command. Everyone settles. Lights out!



Evocative music is heard. Lights on. A small vaudeville placard announcing the first playlet appears: Two Funerals 1855. Kaufmann is sooooo sad. A trained clown, her expressiveness glues the short pieces together with charm. Three kitchen matchboxes stand on their horizontal sides, each with an image on the front. On the far right, a manor house, in the middle, a cemetery, on the left, graves. A group of 3” paper mourners – are pushed from inside the house through the first matchbox, into and through the second, into and through the third as Kaufmann narrates. Two tiny 3-D shovels are stuck into graves. But wait-“Did you hear something!?” The shovels rattle ominously. We’d better check. A matchbox coffin is opened. Blood curdling screams! Black out.

“Buried Alive” is a gothic exploration of age old fears and attraction to the macabre. Each brief tale is enacted by the clever deployment of paper cut-outs (the largest is about 4”) before an interactive set constructed entirely of matchboxes (well, there are a couple of box tops.) Evoking the Nineteenth Century historically, philosophically and visually- with cut-outs, collage, painting and recycled materials- the piece offers a requisite hysterical countess, inadvertent (whoops,) and purposeful murders (“so sorry”) and the dancing dead. Characters of various artful scale, in and outside coffins, surprise with decidedly undead actions and reactions at pivotal moments. No trite vampires or zombies here, this is classical period horror. It’s tidy. Edward Gorey fans will love it.



In the longest short story, entitled *A Waiting Mortuary- Germany 1855\**, Kaufmann plays an attendant hired... just in case... to watch for signs of life. She wears a white apron (there are playful costume changes) exactly like that of the tiny paper figure in the cardboard scenario before us: a tilted box top, in which her small cut out figure is surrounded by 1 ½” matchbox coffins and above which a bell is suspended-should a body need to communicate. “Are you here for the tour?” The inventive, rather grotesque experiment conducted in the names of science and peace of mind, requires audience participation. Everyone is game. Smiles abound. There are a few squirms.

Deborah Kaufmann has conjured an engaging and ingenious world. *Moirés* are interesting and depicted with comic deadpan perversity. Except for a disappointing epilogue instead of a dramatic climax, “*Buried Alive*” is a wink and raised eyebrow of an entertainment, a unique experience, great fun.

Go to [www.tooshorttofallover.com](http://www.tooshorttofallover.com) to read about the fascinating Ms. Kaufman, her work and play. And to [www.pollocks-coventgarden.co.uk](http://www.pollocks-coventgarden.co.uk) to see/purchase wonderful reproductions of 19th century paper theaters.

\* *Waiting Mortuaries*, most popular in 19th Century Germany, were designed specifically for the purpose of confirming that deceased persons were truly dead. To alleviate fears, the

recently deceased were housed for a time in waiting mortuaries, where attendants would watch for signs of life.

“Inspired by ... research into the myths, truths history and ethics surrounding the true moment of biological death.”

“Buried Alive” a matchbox theater  
Conceived, constructed and performed by Deborah Kaufmann

*Photos:*

*Opening Photo by Jim Moore*

*All others by Barbara Michaels*

**Theater for the New City**

155 First Avenue (between 9th & 10th streets)

[www.dreamupfestival.org](http://www.dreamupfestival.org) 212-254-1109

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