

Amanda Ambrose copes

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I once got poison pen letters from Aristophanes. That's how long I've been writing about the theatre. And I thought I had met every type of performer. I know little talents with little aspirations and big talents with big motivations. I know people who'd die for the theatre and I know people who've died in it. I know healthy actors who've been destroyed by the theatre and sick actors who've been made whole by it. I know rich actors who talk a lot about art and I know poor actors who talk a lot about rent.

But all of them — good bad, healthy, poor, rich or sick — have had one thing in common: not one of them has been happy. I've always assumed that either the theatre attracts more unhappy people than a psychiatrist does, or that it is written in their chromosomes that all actors be miserable.

Then I meet someone like Tondelayo Ming Toy Lipschitz, and my assumptions crumble around me. Not only is her talent as a singer somewhere in the superstar range, not only has she a remarkable career in back of her and an even more remarkable career irratore, not only is she "the most qualified woman in a black body on this planet in organizational technology," she's happy as well.

So: yes, Virginia, there really is a Santa Claus.

I first met Ms. Lipschitz the day after I'd seen her perform — exquisitely — in *Dont Bother Me I Cant Cope*, which has just extended its run through December 24 at the Huntington Hartford theatre. I really didn't expect much. People who are overwhelming on stage tend to be underwhelming in the privacy of their living rooms. But Tondelayo — her real name is Amanda Ambrose, and I suppose I'll have to call her that, but I prefer the more exotic name, by which she is listed in the New York phone book — is what in the Renaissance was called an original. She's in love with her own life and with everyone else's. She's in love with being here, and she can make you forget — at least for a while — that you're not.

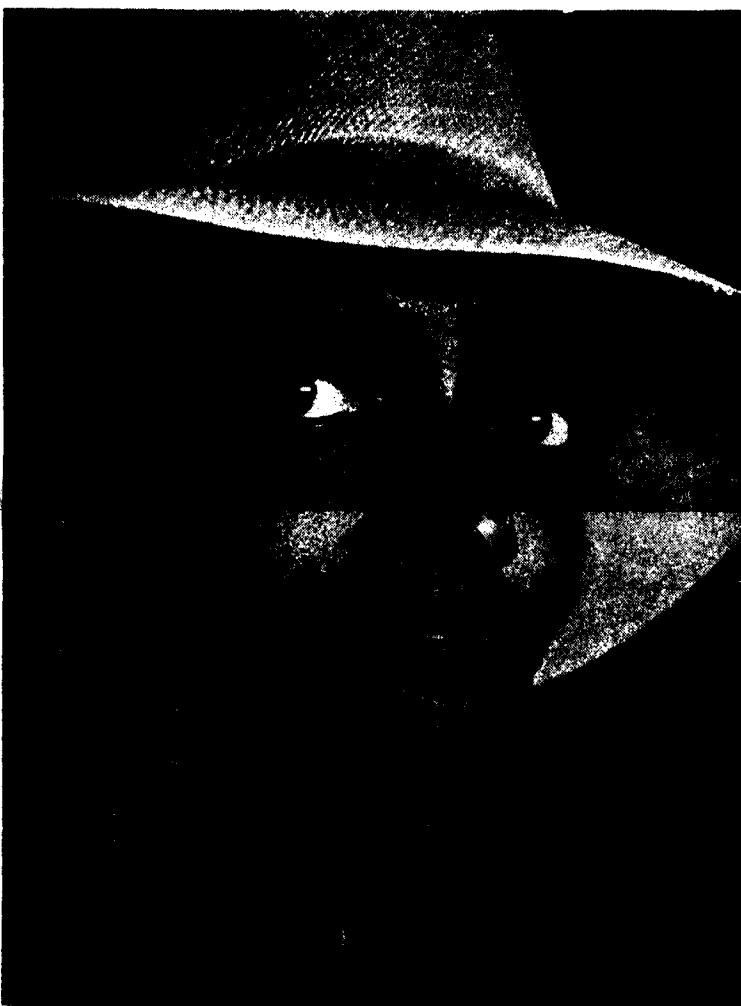
In short, she can cope, and she gives all the credit to Scientology, an "applied religion" that is quite a change from the African Episcopal Methodist church in which she was raised, or the Buddhist church in Chicago in which she brought up her five children.

Maybe there's something to L. Ron Hubbard's "technology for living" after all. Oh, I still have a hundred misgivings about it, and a score of questions no one seems able to answer, but, to put it simply, I never met a Clear I didn't like.

A Clear is a kind of merit badge given by Scientology to those persons who have been able to escape the strangle-hold of their past and to



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Tondelayo Ming Toy Lipschitz

use their emotions to their advantage. As Amanda puts it: "I no longer operate from that part of my mind that kept me from being what I wanted to be. When you're Clear, you can look at the stops in your life, recognize them for what they are, and handle them."

Amanda first became a Clear in June of 1970, two years after "a panic" about the meaning of her life had led her to Scientology. Her career up to that point had been successful enough to satisfy the average performer — it included an appearance in Carnegie Hall, a tour with Harry Belafonte, her own TV specials, and an extended tour of

colleges in this country and in Europe — but it left her with a gnawing feeling of dissatisfaction and drift.

"I had a chance to get around and see the shape the world was in. And I knew that I had to do something about it. I didn't want to perform. The return wasn't great enough. What I as an individual could do was like applying a band-aid to cancer. I was doing it, but the bad guys kept gaining on me. So I couldn't do it alone. I had to do it with a group."

Now she is the Administrator of Public Relations for that group, and she sees Scientology as a way to bring-back a sense of ethics to the

arts. "The world has so many detractors, so many people trying to make everyone else unhappy. My God, we could all be so constructive if we thought and worked as a group. More than anything, mankind wants to be a group and to be happy. I'm already there, and I want to apply this happiness of mine to art."

Which brings us back to *Cope*. During the three short weeks of rehearsals before the show moved into the Mark Taper Forum — where it was hugely popular, making possible the transfer to the Hartford — Amanda tried to bring that happiness to work on the cast. Each day she would conduct exercises to "open" the other actors and to free them from the burdens they brought into the theatre with them. That spirit carried over into the show, where, focussed by Vinette Carroll's direction, magnified by the extraordinary talents in the cast, and given a lifting voice by Micki Grant's lyrics and music, it became what *Cope* is all about.

Cope is about joy, pure and simple — it's *Hair* in blackface — and if you can't respond to its good vibrations, then, brother, you're dead. I had thought that the show would be ruined by the transfer to the proscenium stage at the Hartford, but it's even better. The actors are more confident than they were at the Taper, and they don't try so hard to be liked, yet they're still fresh enough that their enthusiasm never seems manufactured.

I have my reservations about the show itself — which I detailed in my original review — but I have no reservations at all about the cast. It is no exaggeration at all to say that Paula Kelly is one of the great dancing talents in this country, or that Emily Yancy has a limitless future ahead of her. The dancing of Alan

Weeks and Winston Dewitt Hemsley has to be seen to be believed (damn 'em, they all do have rhythm!). In short and in sweet, I doubt that a more talented cast has ever been on a single stage since Ziegfeld bought up all the stars to bury his competition.

And Amanda? Well, she does something special to me. Her singing of "Billie Holiday" (after which Paula Kelly dances what is running through the singer's mind), is the high-water mark of a show already at high tide. And her a capella rendering of "Universe in Mourning" is almost unbearably strong. (Ironic, isn't it, that the happiest member of the cast sings the only downbeat numbers in the show?)

It should be obvious that I'm a little bit in love with her as a performer and a little big jealous of her affair with L. Ron Hubbard. After all, she didn't do much performing in those four years since he came into her life — the Taper had to hunt her down on his yacht to get her for *Cope* — and I'd rather have her performing than proselytizing.

Of course, Tondelayo Ming Toy Lipschitz may be able to do both — she will go to San Francisco and to Las Vegas with *Cope*, and she is putting together a TV show, a book, and an album — and I suppose I shouldn't be so selfish. If she were to do nothing but perform, she'd only make the stage a better place. What she wants to do is make the world a better place. So I guess I'll have to get used to the idea of sharing her.