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red, black, & GREEN: a blues by Marc Bamuthi Joseph (review)

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among the figures of the Devil, the Master, and Yeshua not only signaled the intersection of the ostensibly disparate worlds of *The Master and Margarita*, but they also cleverly signified the novel's central premise, which a projection of the novel's epigraph from Goethe's *Faust* highlighted: the power that wills evil actually does good.

Capturing the novel's transcendental dimension, the production's concluding scenes proved very moving. Pilate, at peace, walked beside the naked Yeshua in a new, bright path of light, and finally the lovers lay cocooned Chagall-like in each other's arms onstage, simultaneously projected against the cosmos, into whose deepening vortex they rapidly diminished and disappeared. Powerfully expressing a vision of mercy and redemption and theatricalizing so consummately the novel's diverse elements, Complicite's *The Master and Margarita* emphatically repudiated any suggestion that adaptation from one medium to another is a secondary artistic pursuit that necessarily simplifies. Indeed, McBurney's staging possessed a unity that some claim that Bulgakov's novel lacks.

STUART YOUNG
University of Otago

red, black, & GREEN: a blues. By Marc Bamuthi Joseph. Directed by Michael John Garcés. MAPP International Productions. REDCAT, Los Angeles. 2 February 2013.

Through a mesmerizing hybridization of hip-hop aesthetics, dance, spoken word, visual art, rhythm, song, theatre, and film, *red, black, & GREEN: a blues* offered a powerful, ecologically engaged performance that built a personalized and emotional connection among issues of survival, urban wastelands, violence, food scarcity, poverty, homelessness, toxic dumping, and intergenerational health. Marc Bamuthi Joseph created and performed *red, black, & GREEN* in collaboration with visual artist/set designer Theaster Gates, as well as actor/dancer Traci Tolmaire, drummer/beat-boxer/turntablist Tommy Shepherd (aka Emcee Soulati), and vocalist Yaw. Commissioned by the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis, this immersive production has collaborated with audiences in San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, New York, Boston, and Seattle, among other cities, to build a new vision of sustainability, with additional performances scheduled into 2014.

Before the conception of *red, black, & GREEN*, Bamuthi worked with the Youth Speaks organization to mount a series of *Life is Living* festivals in public

parks in Oakland, New York, Houston, and Harlem promoting environmental awareness in under-resourced urban neighborhoods. Festival participants taught him that the concept of "going green" is too limiting for many urban citizens. Bamuthi, together with community members, began to examine the broader question of "what sustains life" in their communities. In *red, black, & GREEN*, Bamuthi and his collaborators poetically wove together collective input from the *Life is Living* festivals, examining the impact of urbanization on the natural environment and urban citizens, and the determining effects of global, national, and local economic and cultural forces in urban centers. Bamuthi and his collaborators expanded the idea of sustainability itself into a more holistic intersection of diverse community and environmental factors.

Bamuthi uses an exploration of performance, and eco-performance in particular, to delve further into this expanded concept of sustainability. Collaborative and immersive in every stage of its conception, the performance itself is a creative eco-system that models thoughtful reinventions of what sustenance really means, and encourages audience members to collectively re-envision this new model of sustainability. Bamuthi invites the audience to interact within a set that opens and moves as an energetic organism, bringing new life to stories gathered at the festivals.

To this end, *red, black, & GREEN* engaged audience members as collaborators in the storytelling process, activating performance aesthetics within the social realm. In the first of the three sections of the performance, titled *the colored museum* (a reference to George C. Wolfe's canonical play), all the audience members entered directly onto the stage, where we peered into the windows of a small, cube-like, weather-beaten house as the performers sang and talked within. Slowly, the actors pulled and pushed apart the cube, splitting it into four separate modules. We found ourselves both inside and outside four separate houses surrounded by the performers, stories, and music. The entire set became a musical instrument itself, Soulati's kinetic compositions drummed and stomped and danced on boards, beams, walls, and steel poles. Yaw rapped from the roof of a shack while Bamuthi stood at an open windowsill chunking through a watermelon with a knife. Tolmaire picked up a slice, sang, danced, and offered a piece of watermelon to an audience member. In the third and final section, titled *back talk*, Bamuthi further blurred the boundaries between performer and viewer by inviting the audience back onto the stage for conversations and food. The intimacy we felt with the stories and with each other evoked a powerful sense of personal responsibility that jump-started post-show conversations



Audience member and Marc Bamuthi Joseph (l to r) during *the colored museum*, the first section of *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. (Photo: Bethanie Hines.)



Marc Bamuthi Joseph and audience members in *red, black & GREEN: a blues*. (Photo: Bethanie Hines.)

about environmental justice, urban citizenship, and finding harmonious relationships with the land and with one another.

In the second section, titled *colors and muses*, we took our seats as performers connected issues of local sustainability to a global context through shorter performances based on conversations from the *Life is Living* festivals. In a spoken-word piece about a Sudanese woman he met in Chicago, Bamuthi connected genocide in the Sudan, homicide in Chicago, and issues of ecological health: "Me and the woman whose son just died are sitting on a bench." He rapped about the idea that the language of green is not big enough to hold life and living in urban centers: "I ask a mother about environment / She tells me of guns / of emotionally disabled boys." Later, Tolmaire riffed on "food insecurities," inspired by the story of an urban farm organizer she met in Houston who provides meals in return for farm labor: "you have the right to education, clean water, you should have the right to fresh food." While Soulati crooned the blues, Bamuthi spun a tale of talking to his 9-year-old son about the complicated legacies of Tupac and the Black Panthers. The narratives built on one another as the performers moved among an array of vocal, musical, and movement-based performances.

As the stories, dances, and songs continued, the performers rotated the set pieces, turning an interior parlor into an exterior porch. These architectural transformations signified the movements from space to place, from "environment" to "environmental justice," from "green" to "life," and invited audience members to participate in these transformational movements as well.

As the performance ended, the actors pushed the four pieces of the house back together again, went inside, shut the blind, and turned on a light. As we might imagine the actors continuing their conversations inside, we might also imagine how we can continue the conversations ourselves and transform what it means to be green, build community collaboratively, sustain life, and perform ecologically. *red, black, & GREEN* represents an important sense of intentional community involvement that is both multi-pronged and expansive, working within many cities throughout the country at the same time that it is specific and local, engaging audiences and performers in the individual and communal work of ecological activism. In an age where sustainability is much on the minds of politicians, citizens, environmentalists, writers, and artists, *red, black & GREEN: a blues* speaks a new language of eco-critical discourse that rouses the collective imagination toward a rigorous, creative reevaluation of what sustains life in our communities.

ARDEN ELIZABETH THOMAS

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RUFF. Performed by Peggy Shaw. Written by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. Directed by Lois Weaver. PS122 COIL Festival, Dixon Place, New York City. 19 January 2013.

Peggy Shaw has never been one to shy away from issues affecting her personal life. As a celebrated queer solo-performance artist and cofounder and collaborator for more than thirty years with the lesbian performance troupe Split Britches, Shaw has demonstrated the value of a creative process that begins with the source text of her own life experience. Channeling her biography into complex performances, she overlays her experience with poetic language, song, and imagery, meditating on the efficacy of the personal as a starting point for political and social exchange through performative experimentation. "I do what I know!" she exclaimed at the top of *Ruff*, coyly signaling the feminist strategies she has used in all of her solo works to date (including *You're Just Like My Father* and *Menopausal Gentlemen*) to make the personal political. This time, it was the very question of what she knew, or rather the recovery of what she thought she knew, that set this show apart from her earlier works, proving that she can still accomplish these goals onstage, albeit in a modified manner.

In *Ruff*, Shaw unearths the disorder and displacement of a desiring and fragmented queer subject facing the after-effects of a stroke she suffered in 2011. In the performance, Shaw reflected on a life history she could no longer fully remember, relying on her unwavering improvisational skill, despite the severity of the stroke. The stage became an outward projection of her own inner state of temporal reflexivity and her continual struggle to recover and remember (and re-remember) her place within the performance. The double bind Shaw faced while performing in the stroke's aftermath is reflected in the structure of the piece: not only has she lost her ability to fully recall her own past experiences, but she is also unable to memorize lines, forcing her style to be inherently rough, improvised, and broken.

The audience at Dixon Place in New York City could feel an unnerving sense of vulnerability and urgency within Shaw's visceral presence as she measured her curtailed capacities for memory as performance. Indeed, circumscribed within the very structure of the piece was Shaw's determination to recover and document a past existing within, but simultaneously fractured by her memory: a kind of affective impasse staged publicly, showing us just what it takes for her to *maintain* the performance. Even if the performance "broke down" (that is, Shaw forgot her lines), time did not lapse; instead, these moments encouraged the audience to confront