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What feminists do when things get Ruff

By Kim Solga

Ruff. Written by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. Performed by Peggy Shaw. At the Sacred Festival, Chelsea Theatre, London. 4 and 5 April 2013.

This past spring I wrote a post for my teaching blog [note]¹ about learning to live with failure -- to experience what it means to mess up, or to be messed up, without needing desperately to get outside of that feeling, to move quickly on and away from the terror of what seems in the moment like a shattering personal disaster. This is a skill artists and students especially need: getting back on the proverbial horse after corpsing on stage, or after failing that crucial term paper, can be utterly gut-wrenching, madness-inducing stuff. Then, literally a few days after publishing that post, I received an extraordinary object lesson in what living with failure, with personal disaster, and moving slowly and publicly (and spectacularly, and hilariously) through that experience can look like.

Peggy Shaw, one of the founders of the iconic performance troupe Split Britches, is also one of my performing heroes. As a young graduate student at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada in the mid-1990s I read about her work with Deb Margolin and Lois Weaver in books and journals, in awe of their pointed, bracing sex and gender drag. I saw Shaw perform live for the first time in 1999 in Menopausal Gentleman (1996), when she terrified my partner by seemingly threatening to come into the audience to make him participate in the show. Later, in 2005, I had the privilege of working with Shaw and Weaver during their month-long residency at the University of Texas at Austin, where they revived their ground breaking Dress Suits to Hire (1987) at the Throws Like a Girl festival, curated by Jill Dolan. The Split Britches lesbian-feminist aesthetic, which is based on “DIY” pragmatics mixed with biting satire, mock-magical stage effects, and collaborative dramaturgy, results in shows that resonate as at once deeply personal and welcomingly communal, political and poignant and outrageously funny; throughout my graduate and then postdoctoral work, this aesthetic shaped what contemporary feminist performance looked and felt like to me.

Above all, the work that Peggy Shaw has made both as a solo performer and as a member of Split Britches over the last thirty-odd years has always seemed to me like a series of rich trompe l'oeils: superficially simple and even slightly ham-fisted, they are reach-in-and-grab-your-gut shows that invite audience members into an optically inverted performance world in which nothing seems planned and yet everything, everything, is invariably under control. Shaw's deadpan baritone may give the unmistakable impression that she's ad-libbing that crazy string of observations about "the Ohio in me" toward the end of Dress Suits, but she knows exactly when to put her hand in her suit jacket pocket and pull out the next grotesque guffaw, drawing seamlessly the connection between a closeted gay childhood, a love/hate affair with dirty sex, and a desperate need to play the clown while also poking fun at the urban prejudices of her downtown audiences. ^[note]2

In 2011, however, the material conditions under which Shaw's shows were made irrevocably changed. She suffered a stroke; it changed the way her brain works, ripped up her short term memory, and altered the ways in which her human body copes with the rigours of creating, learning, performing and touring. But, of course, it didn't stop her. Ruff, her latest solo work, is all about the experience of living and working through and with her stroke-changed body/mind. It premiered in Alaska late in 2012, and visited Dixon Place in New York to rave reviews in early 2013 before coming to the Sacred Festival at the Chelsea Theatre in London for two days in April, where I saw it. Ruff is, in Diva reviewer Alena Dierickx's words, an "ode to vulnerability and ageing that is all too often hidden away as if it is shameful or, worse still, boring." For me, as an (ageing) feminist scholar, a teacher of young men and women, and a longtime Peggy Shaw fan, this is exactly what makes Ruff an essential intervention into contemporary feminist activist performance, as well as into the history of feminist performance practice still being written.

Shaw arrived on stage to thunderous applause and hoots of glee from an audience of friends, colleagues, and fans; she grinned broadly, clutching an orange, a shoe, and a bottle of water to her chest. When the applause died down she began speaking in a voice that felt immediately wrong to me: it was a quite formal, studied tone, almost as though she was struggling to remember her lines. I became anxious, uncomfortable: what was going on?

This wasn't the virtuoso I remembered; this was the artist Shaw usually pretends to be, the artist just barely in control of the show, even as she readies the next laugh, the next trick, the next cutting tale. I realized then, painfully, that this new Shaw was for real: she was indeed a changed performer, an older, physically weaker woman, and the change was steps from me, on stage, struggling to hang in there. Then -- guilelessly, but with (as ever) killer timing -- she handed me her orange.

"Will you hold my orange, please?" She spoke the line with utter sincerity, looking straight into my eyes; now I was in her (slightly awkward) space, part of this new, uncertainly-bodied performing world. I panicked briefly, took the orange, and then sat back in my chair, cradling it in both hands. I didn't know what to do with it, or how long I would have to hold it. (At one point I panicked again as I imagined myself having to go home to, what? Eat it? Compost it?) But I felt a very strong surge of responsibility toward it: I knew I could not put the orange down, like a bag or a coat or whatever else I had brought with me. It wasn't stuff; it was a kind of connective tissue, maybe scar tissue. Next, Shaw gave my friend Catherine the shoe she was holding, and then our colleague Lara her bottle of water. Always with the same question: could you please...? And just like that, we were all in it, with her, together -- in a way that seemed uncannily familiar, yet not quite like anything we'd felt in this place before.

I remained uncertain and nervous for about 10 minutes as the show proceeded and it became clear that Shaw genuinely was struggling to remember her lines, that she was not, simply can no longer be, the virtuoso I knew. But then I realized that something else was going on, too: that she was making the show out of these strange, awkward shifts and changes -- out of what we as a culture would typically deem her failure as a performer, post-stroke, to pull the show together. Her inability to remember her lines (a direct result of the stroke's alteration of her brain) was audaciously, comically on display: there are three video monitors on wheels around the Ruff performance space, scrolling the full text of the show throughout the hour-long running time so that Shaw can turn to any one of them at any moment and catch up with herself. She moves these monitors and uses them as needed; often, she turns the monitors toward the audience, letting us mark -- and

enjoy! -- the differences between her imperfect memory of the script and the script "as written". Her newly compromised body is ever on display, too: she sits whenever she needs to sit, takes a break when she needs to take a break, and drinks from the bottle of water when she feels a cough coming on - but only after first asking the bottle-holder politely if she might have a drink.

This is not a performance in which Shaw only seems not in control; it is a show deliberately about her loss of control, and about what that loss does and does not need to mean for her as a performer, a performance maker, a sexual being, an older woman, a human being. Like the best of her past work, it is also a performance for and about her audiences, but this time with a further difference: Ruff bridges the space between stage and auditorium by casting its spectators as caregivers. We become the show's literal as well as its figurative support system. We hold Shaw's stuff while we watch; we wonder when our cues will come up; we hand her stuff back to her when she needs it. We witness her stumbles and cheer her achievements, and we laugh and clap and laugh again as she turns the Kafka-esque ridiculousness of living through stroke into her trademark lesbian-feminist-butchy-outrageous comedy. We are a community of vulnerable human beings who have landed smack in the middle of the space in which Shaw is busy transforming her own psychophysical weaknesses into performance, into pleasure, into art -- and in a culture in which women over 40 are typically considered too old to play serious roles, and in which female actors over 60 are fortunate not to be dismissed by producers, directors, and reviewers outright, this simple act may be the most radically feminist gesture of Shaw's career thus far.

Ruff, however, is not Shaw's show alone. Co-written with Weaver, this piece is, as a result of Shaw's compromised body/mind, unusually for her solo work a truly shared endeavour.⁴ Weaver worked behind the scenes on the performance during its development, but she is also a crucial presence wherever it goes up, and on the night I attended she operated as a kind of audience fulcrum, a model for the spectator-caregiver role into which I felt I had been cast. Sitting near the back of the Chelsea's small rake, she was both spectator and actor-manager: when Shaw could not remember where she was meant to be on the stage at any given moment, she called out and

up, “Lois, am I supposed to be here now?” Weaver replied without missing a beat: “Yes. You’re fine.”

Ruff gave me the feeling of utter precariousness. Weaver’s presence in turn offered me a sense of safety, as I’m sure it does routinely for Shaw. But during an informal interview I conducted with Weaver in London in October 2013, I also discovered the extent to which this contradictory affect was very much a deliberate dimension of the show’s making. I had assumed, watching Shaw reach out to Weaver for support, that Weaver’s role on the show was one of burdened caregiver; Weaver told me, however, that while there is of course a dimension of caregiving required of Shaw’s team now, the most notable moments of precarity I had witnessed in Ruff were nothing like as charged, as romantic even, as my memory had made them out to be. That moment when Shaw pretends to have forgotten to reclaim her shoe, and asks the shoe-holder to come up on stage and place it for her? That moment is a ruse. The part where Shaw forgets her place? Those moments are real, but they are also routine; they don’t signal burden, but normalcy. Although Ruff is very plainly a performance about the struggle to carry on with a performance career post-stroke, it is also not a sentimental show; on the contrary, for Weaver it was an especially satisfying project. Shaw’s new uncertainties meant the two needed to work in new ways, affording Weaver fresh dramaturgical control, the freedom to help problem-solve new challenges, and the chance to write a good deal more than she normally does. Which is, perhaps, another way of saying that Ruff is, for all its raw and gorgeous vulnerability, also a quintessentially Shavian tromp-l’oeil: not so precarious after all.

From the moment she walks on stage and reminds us how embarrassing an actor who struggles to remember her lines can be; to the moment we understand that, in this performance, an actor is going to struggle to remember her lines and we are not going to be embarrassed about it for long; to the moment, very late in the hour, when two inflatable, remote-controlled fish float into the space to remind us all that this stroke is not in any way the end of Peggy Shaw’s world, Ruff is the portrait of a strong, able, funny and beautiful feminist performance artist in transition. It is a work of spectacle, dazzling and fun; it is also a work of community, a series of

demonstrations of care, a work of generosity and a celebration of long-standing friendships and working relationships. It is a teaching and learning performance, a work that stages the human-ness of failures; it is a work that laughs at them and through them, one that moves into them, never past them.

NOTES

1. Please see <http://theactivistclassroom.wordpress.com>. A version of this review appeared on the blog on 15 April 2013. "On failure" appeared on 1 April 2013.
2. Dress Suits to Hire can be viewed online at the Hemispheric Institute Digital Video Library; for Shaw's "Ohio" monologue, see Hughes 1996: 142.
3. Information about Lois Weaver's work on Ruff is drawn from an informal personal interview I conducted with her in October 2013.

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