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Review Of The Philadelphia Fringe Festival

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The Philadelphia Fringe Festival (review)

Allen J. Kuharski

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storytelling, call and response, and traditional theatre practices. The show's ability to connect to the audience came from a mastery of intellectual nuance meshed with the pleasures of beautiful voices and flashes of humor that emerged from five highly talented performers. *Slanguage* was the only work that reflected the complexities of black and Latino lives. This is not to say that the members of Universes were the only non-white performers—Big Art Group's cast is multi-racial—but *Slanguage* specifically addressed issues of race and region from a perspective rarely on the University of Texas's stages.

Fresh Terrain provided a new standard for university theatre and dance training at the University of Texas at Austin by exploring diverse conventions of theatre and performance. Students at the University of Texas at Austin, while already familiar with styles and methods of mainstream dance and regional theatre, experienced an opportunity to become versed in the possibilities and potentials for challenging these practices through their own work. For years Austin has been a city open to new work—almost half of the productions last year were original experimental pieces. This joint production by the UT Department of Theatre and Dance, and P.S. 122 furthered the development of cutting edge performances in central Texas.

JESSICA HESTER

The University of Texas at Austin

THE PHILADELPHIA FRINGE FESTIVAL.

30 August–14 September 2002.

Over the past six years the Philadelphia Fringe Festival has emerged as an important showcase and catalyst for the city's growing alternative performance scene. Nominally modeled on the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, the annual Philadelphia event uses the city's historic center as a free-wheeling, pedestrian-friendly platform for a spectrum of both local and visiting companies. Unlike Edinburgh, however, there is no well-funded main festival to play against, audiences are overwhelmingly local, and Philadelphia companies are very prominent in the program. In lieu of a main festival program, the Philadelphia Fringe has instead established a so-called "Spotlight" series of headlining events that includes commissions and a mix of Philadelphia, US, and world premieres. The scale of the festival has become remarkable, featuring roughly 250 different productions, half of which were by local artists.

This year's Spotlight series included the US premieres of two Canadian performances (*Cul-De-Sac*, by the Obie Award-winning company da da kamera; *Phon Tour*, by the Vancouver-based percussion troupe Scrap Arts Music), the American debut of Britain's physical theatre company Protein Dance (performing *Publife*), and the belated North American premiere of *Carmen Funebre*, the renowned street theatre performance by Poland's Teatr Biuro Podróży ("Travel Agency Theatre"). The Americans featured in the program included solo performances by Roger Guenveur Smith in *Iceland* and Danny Hoch in *Jails, Hospitals, and Hip-Hop* (reviewed in *Theatre Journal* 50.4: 523–25). Both Smith and Hoch were returning to Philadelphia after enjoying success at earlier editions of the Fringe Festival. Hoch's piece played to standing-room-only houses at the city's landmark Theatre of Living Arts on South Street, the site of André Gregory's historic, if short-lived, resident company in the city in the early 1970s and today (apart from the Fringe), a popular rock music venue. The enthusiastic crowd was young, energetic, and urbane—and in composition unlike any other theatre audience to be found in the city during the rest of the year. Another prominent American solo-performance artist appearing in the festival (though not as part of the Spotlight series) was Karen Finley in her meditation on the events of September 11 entitled *Distribution of Empathy*. Local productions in the Spotlight program consisted of Headlong Dance Theater's world premiere of *Britney's Inferno* (commissioned for the festival and performed to sold-out houses at the city's Arden Theatre) and director Mark Lord's ambitious (and again well-attended) production of Peter Handke's cryptic 1971 play *The Ride across Lake Constance*. Lord's company Big House performed the play in a long-abandoned movie palace in the city's historic but scrappy Northern Liberties district.

Headlong Dance Theater and Big House are part of a constellation of young theatre and dance companies that have flourished around and through the growth of the Philadelphia Fringe Festival. There is a distinct ethos and sense of community that distinguishes these young companies, which include Pig Iron Theatre Company, Moxie Dance Collective, New Paradise Laboratories, Court, Theatre Exile, and Lucidity Suitcase. There is a free flow of collaborative energies among actors, dancers, directors, choreographers, playwrights, and musicians. Original, ensemble-generated work predominates, with a strong emphasis on music, movement, and image in the theatre work and an embrace of theatrical spectacle and dramaturgy in dance performance. While distinct and stable company structures exist, there is an admirable



Maggie Siff, Juan Mora y Araujo, Charlotte Ford, David Warner (above), and David Disbrow (below)
in Mark Lord's Big House production of Peter Handke's *The Ride across Lake Constance*.
Photo: Hiroshi Iwasaki.

porousness among the members of the various ensembles. Collaborative teams of two or more companies often join forces on a given project: dance companies collaborate with playwright/dramaturgs; choreographers act in dramas; designers move freely between theatre and dance projects and occasionally perform. Such openness to cross-collaboration and to any individual artist's wish to cross categories of creative work is a point of honor in the Philadelphia alternative scene. Company partisanship is seen as bad form, as are narrowly-defined notions of "professionalism." Independent projects produced apart from the established company structures are common and encouraged. The Philadelphia Fringe Festival has proven a vital and appropriately flexible platform for work of every level, showcasing various local works-in-progress alongside its Spotlight series.

Two productions apart from the Spotlight series illustrated the various synergies at work in both Philadelphia and its Fringe Festival. Two members of the Pig Iron Theatre Company, Quinn Bauriedel and Geoff Sobelle, both alumni of the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, performed a new work-in-progress entitled *machines machines machines machines machines machines machines* in a rough-found space under the ad hoc rubric of Antique Mécanique. A wordless pop-driven clown show featuring a pair of vaguely paranoid gadget-mad roommates, the performance consisted of a series of *lazzi* constructed around the conceit of automating the simplest daily tasks (brushing your teeth, preparing a bowl of cereal with sliced banana, etc.) in the most unlikely ways using decidedly low technology. Produced on a shoestring—and in fact employing a number of shoestrings—the project's blithe frivolousness circled around a dark core. The farcical paradox of the characters' beaverishly industrious pursuit of leisure via technology is intertwined with their acute isolation and distrust of humanity (and even of each other) in favor of their weird and funny inventions. The characters' paranoia and the suburban basement-cum-bunker that they inhabit suggest an absurd survivalist fantasy, mixing free-floating aggression with escapism. Bauriedel and Sobelle's poker-faced performances of these clueless obsessive kept the piece both light in tone and rich in implication.

At the other end of the production scale was choreographer/performance artist Paule Turner's *Medea: Love Is the Devil*, described as a two-act metal opera, co-produced by Turner's company Court and the Melanie Stewart Dance Theatre. Turner (who also performs elsewhere in drag as "Duchess") here played the title role in the first full performance of the piece, previously in develop-

ment at various area theatres and universities (with others initially playing the role of Medea under his direction) for over a year. Accompanied by a live rock band (Bezerker's Happy Hour) performing lyrics written by Turner himself and a tightly choreographed chorus of women (played by both men and women), Medea here is the ultimate diva-as-outsider. Turner's Medea is a street-fighting black androgynous consciously purged of irony and camp, physically and vocally ready and able to front her own band of heavy metal musicians, much less take revenge on the man who has betrayed her. The feckless Jason is played by a blond white woman (Laura Peterson) in all-white male drag. In his audacious way, Turner is quite true to the essence of Euripides' text (he uses Eleanor Wilner's translation) and yet renders it with all the bravura of a 1970s vintage rock concert. That the piece feels as fresh and unapologetic as rock opera no less than as a startling and accessible theatrical rendition of a Greek tragedy is no small feat. Turner's work here is unabashedly arch and aggressive, a celebration of the dramatic *grand geste*, and as such succeeds simultaneously as self-conscious queer performance, go-for-broke popular entertainment, and an apt and layered embodiment of Euripides' heroine. *Medea: Love Is the Devil* stands apart from the rest of the Philadelphia alternative scene in tone and style, and its creator embraces, if not relishes, the role of the disdainful and provoking exiled Princess of Colchis in the domain of the ironic, white, and straight. Turner's Medea embodies everything that drives Bauriedel and Sobelle's clowns sullenly to hunker down in their suburban basement redoubt.

Big House's production of *The Ride across Lake Constance* was in its frigid way as frankly arch, unrelenting, and operatic as Turner's *Medea*. Designer Hiroshi Iwasaki's marvel of a set was a vast baroque installation in the gutted interior of the pre-war Imperial Theater, of which the delicate faded frescoes loomed in the shadows above the actors. A grand and decrepit faux marble staircase was placed to one side and a sprawling lounge of piss-elegant, second-hand furniture suggested a vast, brooding, and thoroughly seedy Middle European hotel lobby, perhaps off-season in some musty Alpine resort. Lord's production opens with the credits for the production projected on the wall as if for the start of a film, but otherwise scrupulously follows Handke's stage directions for the opening of the play, with a maid vacuuming the floor and removing dust covers from the furniture with a glacial thoroughness worthy of Eiko & Koma. This prepared the audience for a nearly three-hour performance without intermission. An ensemble of young Philadelphia actors (David

Disbrow, David Warner, Charlotte Ford, Maggie Siff, and Juan Mora y Araujo) created a vivid and engaging rogue's gallery of characters all named after themselves. Disbrow and Warner played a pair of middle-aged, world-weary, and jaded fellow travelers in satin dressing robes, smoking cigars and conducting obscure verbal duels with each other. Charlotte Ford and Maggie Siff eventually invade the men's solitude via that grand staircase, smoldering with *film noir* glamour, moving in high heels and jewel-like cocktail dresses through an aureole of cigar smoke. They assert confidence but cast a shadow of anxiety and futility. Juan Mora y Araujo later arrives like a youthful Rudolf Valentino or Errol Flynn. Lord and his cast are game and inventive, fully investing in every moment of Handke's playful but resolutely chilly and obscure text. The ensemble keeps the audience with the play, and rightly or wrongly it is their work rather than Handke's that ultimately holds the evening together both in the moment and in retrospect. While it is not clear that Big House's production makes the case for bringing back Handke's play, the imaginative richness, daring, and sophistication of the company's endeavor puts it in a league of its own among recent Philadelphia productions both within and beyond the Fringe.

The Fringe Festival's greatest programming coup, however, was the belated North American premiere of Teatr Biuro Podróży's *Carmen Funebre*, a classic of contemporary street theatre with performances in over thirty countries to date. The piece was performed on a cement-covered pier on the banks of the Delaware River. A nightly audience of roughly 500 people stood or sat on the ground on three sides of a square playing area. The fourth side of the square consisted of two large scaffolding towers flanking a pair of high swinging gates. At the start of the performance, ominous throbbing music slowly rises in volume as looming, gladiator-like male figures on high stilts and carrying searchlights appear in the distance and slowly approach the crowd from several directions. With bullwhips in hand, they begin inspecting and menacing the crowd, eventually pulling several figures onto the playing area. These turn out to be members of the cast, who are subsequently terrorized by the plunging stilts and cracking whips of the warriors. What follows is a series of interlocking metaphorical scenes capturing the visceral cruelties and the amoral ironies released by war. The rape of a woman by a group of drunken soldiers consists of her being spun in and out of a length of white fabric while the men spray her face with wine spat from their mouths. Later these same soldiers return as beggared and crippled veterans to panhandle the audience. Crude wooden

crosses are brought on to mark the graves of those killed, and are solemnly draped with the abandoned clothes of the deceased. Then, in a stark shift, these clothes and the crosses are set aflame, becoming ambiguous effigies of revenge. Are these burning crosses yet another violation of the dead, or are they instead the emblem of the revenge inspired by those killed? In the piece's most haunting and original image, the actors release helium balloons into the night sky, each with a miniature translucent paper house suspended beneath, which is illuminated by a candle from within. On the opening night, a swift wind swept the tiny village of flickering air-borne houses over the structure of the near-by Benjamin Franklin Bridge. At another performance, a gentler breeze carried the balloons off in the opposite direction, where they eventually vanished against the starry night sky. Near the end of the piece, a figure of death on stilts appears and strides vigorously around the stage with a massive pitchfork, savoring the carnage. In a final tour de force, the scaffolding structure and gate burst into flames and the suspended metal panels covering them fall one by one to the ground. Death makes a last appearance, triumphantly brandishing a black flag amidst the smoking ruins.

That no American presenter had invited Teatr Biuro Podróży before is a cause for some wonder and dismay. Originally created and performed in Poznan, Poland, in 1993, *Carmen Funebre* was originally a response to the war in Bosnia. The young company, a product of Poland's dynamic student theatre scene, pushes the familiar vocabulary of street performance to a level of cruel theatrical eloquence not seen since the late masterpieces of Tadeusz Kantor. In 2001, the Philadelphia Fringe Festival was overshadowed by the events of September 11, and the apt response of artistic director Nick Stuccio was to mark the first anniversary of the terrorist attacks in 2002 with the opening performance of *Carmen Funebre*. Nine years after its creation, *Carmen Funebre* resonated acutely with the recent war in Afghanistan and growing fears around the situation in Iraq and the Middle East no less than it recalled the agonies of Bosnia or those of Poland itself in an earlier time. The Polish company's greatest coup remains its mixture of poetic detachment and visceral empathy—which proved a disarmingly appropriate combination for an American audience suspended between wars.

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