Dada Bing, Dada Boom! Greil Marcus's Sex Pistols

SEVENTEEN LIAR BODIES

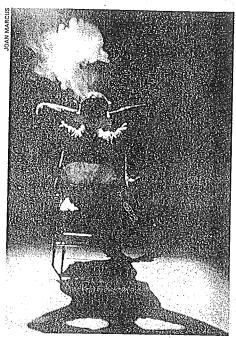
3Y JESSICA WINTER

JPSTICK TRACES

Conceived and directed by Shawn Sides, idapted by Kirk Lynn, from the book by Sreil Marcus, presented by the Foundry Theatre Dhio Theatre 6 Wooster Street 100-965-4827

Devout popular-music scholar and anythingoes sociologist, Greil Marcus only conects—and when that fails, only projects. for him, one throwaway couplet in a radio it can hopelessly tangle the threads of rock enealogy; one squall of feedback can sumion ancestral specters from far-flung medims, cultures, and vernaculars. The idea of op song as secret sharer glints off the titles f his books: Mystery Train; Invisible Repubc; and perhaps his quintessential work, ipstick Traces, in which the Sex Pistols' rief, riotous holiday in the sun marks the arting line for stream-of-consciousness yoo anthropology. Johnny Rotten, et al., beome collaborative players in Marcus's tolizing, mutable history play; the Rude echs company literalize the conceit with a st and furious staging of Lipstick Traces, a larious, unexpectedly haunted compreson of the cult tome.

In this case, acting about rock criticism esn't amount to dancing about architecre. Hosted by nervous hipster Dr. Narrator ana Lesley) and smug fop Malcolm cLaren (David Greenspan), Lipstick Traces 1't plotless so much as simply omnidirecmal. Chronology dissolves; prophecies hapin in reverse. McLaren, the latter-day Siationist, rubs shoulders with real-deal Guy bord (James Urbaniak). German heretic hn of Leyden (Ean Sheehy)-who decided at he was king of the New Jerusalem, Müner, four centuries before John Lydon (Jason ebrecht) proclaimed himself the Anhrist-sits alongside his coincidental mesake during the infamous Bill Grundy erview. A cacophonous, gloriously deaged Cabaret Voltaire performance (with baniak as Hugo Ball, Sheehy as Tristan ara, and the extraordinary T. Ryder Smith Richard Huelsenbeck) establishes a precent for Rotten's storied Pistols audition, ere he stalks, barks, gargles, and peacocks way through a song he barely knows (Al-Cooper's "I'm Eighteen"). But somehow, Dada trio, directed for maximum Keyne Kop kinesis by Shawn Sides, seems roactively influenced by the Ministry of y Walks. (Marcus dedicated Lipstick wes in part to Monty Python.)



PRETTY NOT VACANT: URBANIAK AS GUY DEBORD

The comedy, like the proscenium, often fades to black; the play defies time, and yet it's clouded over by a sense of impending doom. Matching the macabre photograph of Rotten that takes up a page of the book, the actors are harshly illuminated from below. shadows hollowing their eyes to sockets. They often break character or switch roles; when they exit the stage, Dr. Narrator not only thanks them but addresses them by their real names. The rueful Brechtian maneuvering (admittedly strained at times) negates Pete Townshend's encomium, "When you listen to the Sex Pistols . . . what immediately strikes you is that this is actually happening"-and so does putting Townshend's words in the mouth of their flamboyantly cynical manager. (McLaren/Greenspan poses his cigarette at such an ostentatiously awk ward angle that it's a distancing gesture in it.

self.) When some mute bloke dressed as Dada Death first arrives, he's just another cheeky freak blowing raspberries at the Silver Jubilee. The longer he sticks around, though, the more he takes on the menacing air of a silent inquisitor. No future for you.

The Sex Pistols, at least as far as McLaren was concerned, were an eight-legged readymade. He claimed it didn't matter who you got to be in your band, so long as they hated each other and they couldn't play. Julien Temple took this posture to its logical extreme in his pseudo-documentary The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle, where a parade of Johnnys-onthe-spot grab the mic in place of the departed lead singer. All the same, Liebrecht faces a tough task as the inimitable destroyer of passersby, but he nails Rotten's wet-cat vulnerability and smirking rage. And if Rotten/Liebrecht's larynx-scraping redefines sound poetry, then Smith seems to channel it (this is actually happening) with his Huelsenbeck interpretation: a tour de force of howling gibberish that articulates a panic and despair beyond speech, a noise alternately subhuman and supernatural.

If you listen closely, you can hear that same noise on Never Mind the Bollocks. When Rotten auditions in Lipstick Traces, Dr. Narrator leaps up to analyze the performance: "The desire this voice embodies is patent and simple! It begins with the demand to live not as an object but as a subject of history!" The absurdist juxtaposition wittily points up pop music as the raw material for the listener's own invisible republic of personal obsessions and reference points—a liberating form of autobiography. Toward the evening's end, Dr. Narrator barrels through what she calls "the 20th century in four minutes and 30 seconds." As the actors throw off flash cards like Dylan in Don't Look Back, she auction-calls a hundred years, fitting her mom's birth in with World War II and linking her split with her first boyfriend to the breakup of the Dadaists after Zurich. As much as Lipstick Traces is the thrilling, bottomless story of how a Situation became a band (and vice versa), it's also the story of how a fan becomes a disciple. Plus it name-checks Hüsker Dü's "Never Talking to You Again" and the Lettrists International in nearly the vseine breath. A little no and a big Yes, U.