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

SEVENTEEN LIAR BODIES

BY JESSICA WINTER

JPTSTICK TRACES
Conceived and directed by Shawn Sides, adapted by Kirk Lynn, from the book by Greil Marcus, presented by the Foundry Theatre
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Devout popular music scholar and anything-goes sociologist, Greil Marcus only connects—and when that fails, only projects. For him, the throwaway couplet in a radio jingle can不可缺少ly energize the sexy, romantic specters of rock and roll. One squall of feedback can summon ancestral specters from the $2,000 dinner, cultures, and vernaculars. The idea of a song as secret sharer glints off the titles of his books: Mystery Train, Invisible Republic; and perhaps his quintessential work, Lipstick Traces, in which the Sex Pistols’ rieh, riotous holiday in the sun marks the section line for stream-of-consciousness, auto收到了anthropology. Johnny Rotten, et al., become the collaborative players in Marcus’s tootizing, mutable history play; the Rude Echo company literalizes the conceit with an a set and furious staging of Lipstick Traces, a luscinious, unexpectedly haunting compres-son of the cult tome.

In this case, acting about rock criticism seems to amount to dancing about architecture. Hosted by nervous hipster Dr. Narrator (Lesley E. Serle) and smug top Malcolm McLaren (David Greenspan), Lipstick Traces isn’t plotless so much as simply omnidirectional. Chronology dissolves; prophesies happen in reverse. McLaren, the latter-day Situationist, rubs shoulders with real-deal Guy borden (James Urbaniak), German heretic von Loyden (Evan Sheehy)—who decided at he was king of the New Jerusalem, Mün-ner four centuries before John Lydon (Jason Sprechel) proclaimed himself the Anarchist—shits alongside his coincidental musketeer during the infamous Bill Grundy event. A cacophonous, gloriously deluged Cabaret Voltaire performance (with baniak as Hugo Ball, Sheehy as Tristan tara, and the extraordinary T. Ryder Smith as Richard Huelsenbeck) establishes a preceweight for Rotten’s storied Pistols audition, and he stalks, bars, gurgles, and peacocks through a song he barely knows (Al- Cooper’s “I’m Eighteen”). But somehow, the Dada trio, directed for maximum key ne Kop kinkiness by Shawn Sides, seems reactively influenced by the Ministry of y Walks. (Marcus dedicated Lipstick Traces in part to Monty Python.)

The comedy, like the prosenium, 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. Theyoften break character or switch roles; when they exit the stage, Dr. Narrator not only thanks them but addresses them by their real names. The rufel Brechtian maneuvering (admittedly strained at times) negates Pete Townsend’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/Greenup poses with cigarette at such an ostentatiously awkward angle that it’s almost hypnotic.)

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 ready-made. 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 Johnny-on-the-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 farynx-scrapping 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 witty 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 barrows 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 handful 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 identical manner; imagine the theory!