

THE FRENCH LINE

Phillip Lopate

Big Dance Theater, *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*, The Kitchen, New York, NY, October 1–10, 2009.

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Since 1991, when Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar founded their Big Dance Theater, the couple (she specializing more in choreography, he more in acting) has been evolving a distinctive performing style that is as entertaining, amusing, and accessible as it is disciplined. Often experimental theatre can be punitive and solemn, forcing the audience, in the name of some avant-garde ideal of austere difficulty, to “eat its spinach,” so to speak, by attending to languid permutations and repetitions. Big Dance Theater takes the opposite approach, keeping up a rapid pace of quick-changing, ebullient theatrical bits that alternate outbreaks of dance, singing, mixed media screens, wry dialogues, and melancholy soliloquies. Often the “glue” holding it together is an interpretation of some foreign culture—in their last three productions, they have moved from Japan (*The Other Here*), to ancient Greece (*Orestes*), and now to France—which may have as much to do with following funding sources as aesthetic interests. The company’s latest production, *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*, was commissioned by FIAF (the French Institute Alliance Francaise) and premiered at Les Subsistances in Lyons, before playing to sold-out houses at the Kitchen.

The initial inspiration for *Comme Toujours* was Agnès Varda’s 1962 black-and-white film, *Cleo From 5 to*

7. That French *Nouvelle Vague* classic follows a young pop singer, Cleo (played by Corinne Marchand), through the early evening hours of 5:00 P.M. to 7:00 P.M. in more or less real time, as she waits anxiously to receive the results of a biopsy test for cancer, meanwhile attempting to distract herself with visitors (her composers, her lover), devil-may-care friends (Dorothee, an artist’s model), a consultation with a fortune teller, and a dalliance with a soldier she meets *en route* to the doctor. The mood of the film, with its New Wave appetite for Parisian locations and cameo appearances by friends (Jean-Luc Godard, Eddie Constantine, Anna Karina, Michel Legrand), is sprightly, genial, and surprisingly un-morbid, given its overhanging cloud of illness and mortality. But you do get a strong impression of the isolation faced by someone threatened by serious illness, in the company of blithely self-preoccupied show biz *confreres* who, for all their lip service, are ultimately indifferent to her plight.

To anyone familiar with the movie, it is especially fascinating how this theatrical construction, or deconstruction, simultaneously honors, appropriates, reinvents, and departs from its model. Annie-B Parson, credited as the director/choreographer of the production (with husband Paul Lazar listed as co-director), zeroes in on the very French (think of La Rochefoucauld) theme of humanity’s egotistical cruelty.

But she also foregrounds motifs about aging in the life of women, and competitiveness between women, that were not part of the original Agnès Varda scheme. The principal way she makes that shift is by casting the superb Molly Hickok in the role of Cleo: Hickok, a mainstay of *Big Company*, has a comedienne's vivaciously attractive but lined, weathered face and is much closer to middle age than the twenty-something, perkily pretty Corinne Marchand of the film. She plays an aging star with two younger, much more beautiful helpers, who make catty comments about her behind her back. Her main assistant (TyMBERLY Canale) is a cool, seductive blonde with white go-go boots and a pale spring frock with a hemline a few inches above the knees that epitomizes Paris Sixties hip. Her second-in-command (Kourtney Rutherford) is a dazzling redhead who yaks long distance on the phone to her boyfriend and disrobes in one scene, posing nude for artists. The disparity in sexual capital between Cleo and her entourage is underscored in a magnetic scene which begins with Canale doing a sort of Cyd Charisse/ *Band Wagon* sultry number, first by herself and then with the all-purpose male assistant Chris Giarmo; Hickok, seemingly miffed and neglected, barges onstage and changes the routine to a fake-grinning, finger-snapping line dance that is a pathetic cross between the Madison in Godard's *Bande à Part* and some physically undemanding steps for an older TV hostess like Dinah Shore. Aware that she is losing her relevance, becoming passé, Cleo demands that her arrangers give her "something more modern . . . absolutely fresh . . . something distinctive." Yet she appears regularly in a Mme Recamier upswept hairdo and in a succession of anachronistic gowns and nightgowns, which make her look dowdy next to her

chic assistants. Supposedly a great singer, she is not permitted to sing a note; that privilege goes to Giarmo, who warbles a mesmerizing Frenchified version of *And It's Only You*. "As long as I am beautiful, I am ten times more alive than others," she declares uncertainly, like the evil Queen addressing the mirror in *Snow White*; but we see her humiliated, again and again, by her entourage and her own limitations. Trying to descend from a ladder-like construction, she dangles in frustration because her legs are too short, and has to be helped down. Visited by her lover, Jose (uncannily played in drag by Rutherford), she is too proud or unsure of his love to tell him about her cancer scare. She seeks love advice from her other assistant, in a passage that greatly resembles the princess-confiding-in-her-chambermaid scenes out of Racine, and is told coldly, "All men are egoists, Madam" and "You don't make him suffer enough." Much of the play's action (or inaction, as the backstage down-time between rehearsals is cunningly recreated) hovers around putting on a show of some sort. In this milieu, all emotions tend to get exaggerated and made to seem theatrically petulant. Because she is, after all, the Boss, capable of lording it over her retinue, and something of a diva besides, we are inclined to withhold sympathy from her when she weeps and whines about her possible fatal illness, not really sure how seriously to take any of her self-pity. On the other hand, the blasé attitude of her colleagues to the danger Cleo faces seems monstrous in its own right. It is as if they, being younger, cannot make the possibility of terminal illness real to themselves; they treat it as a defect, a delusion of the tediously aging.

A few words should be said about the

technical aspects of the production. All props and costumes can be seen onstage from the start: the costumes hang on a coat rack; the props and stage furniture metamorphose as need demands. (There is a vast white fur hat, for instance, that turns into a fan and a drum). Three screens on wheels are used for projections of stills and movie images, as well as scene headings along the lines of "Chapter Two: Angele from 5:08 to 5:13." In the highly complex sound design, a bell goes off from time to time, signaling performers that it is time to start a new skit. Dialogue is sometimes mumbled in the manner of actors in a Jacques Tati movie. Performers face a computer as if adding their voiceover to projected images. A clever animation of tea cups moving as if by magnets highlights a café scene. Everyone in Cleo's entourage runs around spraying aerosol cans. Ladders are wheeled on and off. Important scenes take place on film while live performers watch. Booming disembodied voices issue from nowhere. Stunning theatrical compositions arise without much ado, like the five performers who, one by one, lie on each other as though they were a set of pillows. Many of these techniques seem drawn from the kit of contemporary experimental theatre, but surprisingly, none of them takes us out of the human drama. None of them operates as an "alienation effect." Even more surprisingly, this production, which so focuses on the particulars of anxiety and fatigue, loneliness of celebrity, hollow feelings fostered by mass media and new technologies, bestows a quite joyous effect overall. It is not only that Cleo manages to reverse her mood at the end, saying "I think I'm not afraid any more. It seems I'm happy." The paradox is that we are willing to accept this potentially saccharine pronouncement because we

ourselves have been made happy, by the stimulating experience spent in the unflaggingly energetic and inventive company of Big Dance Theater.

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