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17c dir. by Annie-B Parson (review)

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Theatre Journal, Volume 70, Number 3, September 2018, pp. 383-387 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/tj.2018.0061>



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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Isaiah Wooden, Editor

17c. Conceived and directed by Annie-B Parson. Co-directed by Paul Lazar. Choreographed by Annie-B Parson and Big Dance Theater. Philadelphia FringeArts. September 8, 2017.

To dedicated fans of Restoration marginalia, devotees of London's Great Fire, and nerds of theatre and dance history, the fondness for Samuel Pepys is a seemingly inexplicable quirk. Despite being a Member of Parliament and the Academy of Sciences during the reign of Charles II, the foppish Pepys led a relatively undistinguished life. He has long been known, however, as an unparalleled diarist, his personal writings offering a uniquely compelling glimpse into not just late-seventeenth-century English manners, but the mysterious whirlpool of consciousness itself. Bereft of metaphor and frequently allergic to allegory, Pepys's artless prose nevertheless lays bare the strange condition of the human mind better than many novelists. As likely to complain of a gallbladder infection as brag of an audience with the king and to vainly undertake a diet or go to the theatre and complain about bad Shakespeare, Pepys's diaries convey the nonhierarchical highs and lows, the lulls and eddies of daily existence with a clarity that pricks the right reader with a sudden shock of self-recognition. He is the ur-blogger, the proto-postmodernist, his digressive imagination anticipating Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* by almost a century and his catalog of daily minutiae the nonfiction *qua* fiction of Karl Ove Knausgård by 350 years.

In her thrilling *17c*, a fleet yet comprehensive theatrical bricolage of the entire thousand-plus-page, million-and-a-half-word corpus, Annie-B Parson and Big Dance Theater bridged this wide gap of time. Employing the full range of Brechtian "literarizations" of the theatre, Parson amply made the case for Pepys's charms, while shining a bright light on his depressingly familiar faults. In ninety minutes that seemed to glide by, Parson's excava-

tion was above all an attempt to see and hear the historical lacuna to whom Pepys devoted so much of his life and to whom the diaries return with obsessive regularity—Elizabeth, his wife.

Fittingly for such an un-introspective subject, Parson worked from the literal outside-in. The evening began with company member Cynthia Hopkins reading Pepys on the topics of his "yards" (erections) and "electuaries" (enemas). Whereas his wife had been bothered by the former, she tells us, his "butthole . . . unable to fart nor to go to stool" has need of the latter. Bits of effluvial trivia were similarly cataloged with glee over the course of the show by the "Annotators"—a millennial Statler & Waldorf hosting a livestreaming webcast devoted to Pepys, itself inspired by the lively message boards at www.pepysdiary.com. On January 9, 1663, one Annotator told us gleefully, Pepys gave himself a nasal infection by "over-rubbing"; later, the other says, Pepys masturbated with a skeleton in a church, exclaiming with a note of triumph, "and he records it!"

The Annotators served as a dramaturgical key to Parson's adaptation, allowing her the freedom to toggle in and out of the text, simultaneously footnoting his prose and commenting on it, while organizing an otherwise narrative-resistant litany of dates into scene-like thematic clusters. Standing at a desk and addressing the camera in the manner by-now ubiquitous to YouTube testimonials, they provided a modern-day "here" to which Parson repeatedly returned from the abstracted "there" of Pepys's seventeenth century. The Annotators also provided much needed moral mitigation, offering a modern-day perspective that pinpointed precisely the qualities that make Pepys so uniquely alluring and alarming.

Peeling the layers of the Pepys onion back methodically, Parsons moved steadily toward the curious abyss at the figure's center. Starting from erections and enemas, the first thirty minutes commenced to Pepysian self-fashioning, at prayer or in



Paul Lazar, Kourtney Rutherford, Cynthia Hopkins, Aaron Mattocks, and Elizabeth DeMent in 17c.
(Photo: Johanna Austin.)

leisure, shopping or dancing, always significantly returning to the conjoined subjects of wife and property. "Blessed be God" Pepys writes in his very first entry, "I live in Axe Yard *having* my wife Bess. . . . My own private condition, esteemed rich but indeed very poor and uncertain." In each of the first three vignette-like scenes, Sam and Bess (embodied with bewigged and balletic poise by Aaron Mattocks and Elizabeth DeMent, while lines from the diaries were whispered into a microphone) encountered each other as dramaturgical antipodes: in lines from Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, in a shared corset dance—most eerily, as complete strangers. "Hi, don't I know you from somewhere?" "I, too, sir. It seems to me as well that you look familiar." Discovering that she lives in the same house as he does, Pepys regards Bess affectlessly, as if looking at a creature embalmed within a jar. It is a dramatic corollary to the experience of reading Pepys's diaries and attempting to see and hear Bess, this ghostly presence, this dramatic blank space.

In another entry theatricalized by Parsons, Pepys writes of that eerily familiar sensation of Woolfian "frock consciousness," of purchasing clothing and then being too shy to wear it in public: "I am still afeared to be seen in my flowered tabby vest and camelot tunique with gold lace hands." Although

the initial effect was drily hilarious, he added, in a chilly afterthought as Bess danced, "some lace for my wife." Clothing being, like dance or, for that matter, marriage, another form of social control. As the climax of this first movement, Parson collated all of Pepys's diary entries on dancing lessons into a heartbreaking micro-farce, with an increasingly jealous Pepys catching Bess in private consort with the dancing master alone and firing him, leaving her to dance her *pas de deux* alone.

Halfway through the action, however, the tone shifted, reaching further extremes of high farce and tragic bathos. The means was a play-within-the-diary, a conjectural restaging of Margaret Cavendish's proto-feminist closet drama *The Convent of Pleasure*, which Pepys had made passing, dismissive mention of—"this mad lady playwright"—in his entry from November 2, 1666. From this chauvinist dismissal, Parson staged a theatrical-historical reversal of surprising power, transforming the suppressed text into an erotic reverie.

Tilting the stage wall—a strangely padded flat seemingly outlined with gray upholstery—Parson used a bench and shrubbery to suggest both the Pepyses' garden (their Cavendish-reading site), as well as a Restoration-style proscenium gone



Kourtney Rutherford and Elizabeth DeMent in *17c*. (Photo: Johanna Austin.)

askance. As if pressing fast-forward, the company repeated the opening lines of Cavendish's play and then "skip[ped] ahead," revealing each scene to be a variation on a standard Restoration trope: rakes in disguise as women, attempting to exfiltrate their desired targets from a homosocial garden world. In Cavendish's play, however, the Congrevian Hyde Park has become an Amazonia, an all-female Eden; the Lady has cloistered herself in a nunnery populated by women doctors and philosophers and protected by walls a "yard thick."

With each loop of the action, the company moved the bush in Pepys's garden, and each attempt at penetration was accompanied by a deepening of emotional registers, from a riotous pastiche of Judith Butler-style Marxist-feminist jargon to increasingly spare and plaintive questioning: "Why may not I love a woman with the same affection I could a man?" asks one of the cloistered women, a question that seems to hang thickly in the air. In a sort of lesbian coup de théâtre, a man dressed as a woman (and played by a woman in another theatre-historical reversal) finally found the nun at the center of Cavendish's convent of pleasure. As she had underlined the alienated marital void by using Ionesco's *Bald Soprano*, Parson scored this dramaturgy of penetration and circular, erotic centers

with a similarly apt French text: Roland Barthes's 1977 *Un Discours des Amanates*. Speaking of the "fatigue of language" and "end of language" amid the intoxication of love, Parson's two female performers kissed, the production's mode of dialectical irony briefly dissolving into pure, hieratic feeling.

Après nous, le deluge. From this moment of the erotic sublime the Annotators led us to the "metaphoric black hole" of the Deb Willett episode, "one of the longest, most uncensored descriptions of an affair in the history of diaries." It was perhaps the show's most arresting set piece, a sustained anti-theatrical aria following after the manic Cavendish metatheatre. Sitting on a chair beside a flickering fireplace, co-director Paul Lazar intoned Pepys's revelatory account of Deb, or "the girlye," who happened to also be his wife's maid. In language as internal as Pepys's writing ever got, suffering from the same failure of language as Cavendish and Barthes, he lusts after the young woman. He writes about her, his obsession for years at a time, filling hundreds of pages of the diaries. Even after Elizabeth had caught him with "my hand sub su coats, *my main in her cunny*" and forced him to fire her, Pepys writes of the humiliating ordeal of slipping out of the house and "cruising the district" in hopes of catching sight of her.



Aaron Mattocks and Elizabeth DeMent in *17c*. (Photo: Johanna Austin.)

As Pepys slides from self-loathing to mutual re-
crimination of the women in his life, Parson and
Lazar daringly conflated the registers of translation,
introducing anachronistic and metaphoric parallels:
“Inside, I’m freaking about the girlye whom I have
no mind to part with,” Lazar said, “I write her name
on bathroom walls in truck stops; I learn sad country
songs and sing them in empty dive bars. . . . I’m not
a certified forklift driver, and I’m driving this one
without a license on a rocky piece of earth.” Parson’s
Pepys continued, descending into delusion:
“I’m thinking maybe the main in the cunny thing,
well, I’m rethinking the evidence, maybe it never
happened anyway, it’s erasing in my mind. . . . Deb
is a cunning girlye, if not a slut! All this misery is
not my fault—I’ve been put under a spell, she’s a
witch.” When Elizabeth threatens to “make all the
world know I am a liar and a rogue,” Pepys is un-
worried: “Data can be fabricated and/or discredited.
And we can always revisit evidence from a larger
demographic.” If Pepys is the proto-Knausgård, so
too is he a Trumpian groper, a mean bully, unable
to control his appetites, a man pitting his word of
sexual assault against a woman’s.

“He’s about as progressive as any other seven-
teenth-century man,” one of the Annotators said in
defense of our dear Sam. But how progressive, we
were left to wonder, is twenty-first-century man?

Pepys, as we learned in a torrent of aggravated
footnoting, married Bess when she was just 14, and
his diaries are strewn with accounts of fondlings
and assignations carried on behind her back. Pep-
ys’s writing, for all its charm, is ultimately nothing
more than the “locker-room talk” of another era. If
his interests suggest the idle self-improvements of
our own era, so also do his shortcomings call into
question the utility of such selfhood, the moral va-
lence of a world in which such abuse is allowed
to run untrammelled. As one of the Annotators left
in disgust, able to take no more, the set began to
dismantle, flats and video cameras wheeled away.
The effect was of a charm dissipating, that strange
sadness of a set being struck. It seemed there was
nothing left to say.

The last twenty minutes of the action were de-
voted to increasingly spectacular reverberations.
In a scene of shocking savagery—the entry from
December 3, 1663—Pepys found Bess’s own diary,
burned each page, and beat her, giving her a black
eye. As she writhed on the floor in the ball gown he
bought her in recompense, she was projected onto
the back wall of the theatre by a camera mounted
on the ceiling. It is one of Big Dance Theater’s sig-
nature effects, used no less memorably to suggest
the Chekhovian abyss of despond in its *Man in a
Case*. The strangely padded flat suddenly became

clear as what it always was—a headboard. The entire stage had been Pepys's bed the whole time, stewed in corruption, the nasty sty. As shown from above, Bess seemed to fall into this black hole, a woman erased from existence.

17c, it turns out, was not even about Pepys at all. The entire work was in fact a circular attempt at giving Bess the face and voice denied her by her husband. Toward the end of the action, Bess spoke. It was another anachronistic text supplied by Parson, a Barthian monologue, circular in its logic, doubling back upon itself: "In my room it's the end of nouns, of names, the end of earth, the end of me, the end of you." Parson's work is a badly needed archaeological excavation of the patriarchal past and a Pepys show of our own current moment, redressing the historical erasure of the feminine and its present-day brutalization through an act of creative paradox.

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NATIONALTHEATER REINICKENDORF.

Created by Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller.
Berliner Festspiele, Berlin. July 6, 8, 2017.

Nationaltheater Reinickendorf (NTR) is the sixth production in Vegard Vinge and Ida Müller's ongoing *Ibsen-Saga* (2006–). The *Saga* is a series of interconnected performances that spin tapestries of associative references out of Henrik Ibsen's plays, resulting in durational dramas whose citations range from the operas of Puccini to the films of Scorsese. The content and length, which change nightly, cohere through themes of aspiration pitted against stultifying dogma. Vinge/Müller's overtly artificial aesthetic unifies the seemingly disparate sources into a stylized universe of dovetailing grand narratives. Like prior installments, *NTR* mined Ibsen's romantic motif of youth battling convention; however, it dramatized this theme as institutional practice. Building a "national theatre" that embodied the creative idealism of its repertory, *NTR* contested the bureaucracy of European state-theatres. *NTR*, serendipitously, premiered the very night that the ousted director of Berlin's Volksbühne, Frank Castorf, gave his farewell performance. Castorf's politicized aesthetics and German-language repertory were replaced with a curatorial model headed by Belgian art historian Chris Dercon. Unionists and artists alike protested Dercon's appointment, fearing that he would reshape the Volksbühne into another characterless pit-stop on the international touring circuit. Against this backdrop, Vinge/Müller's juxtaposition of idealists and bureaucrats warring over the fate of an institution was timely and audacious.

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In addition to Castorf's Volksbühne, *NTR* drew on two of Germany's most utopian theatres: the spiritual destination of Wagner's Bayreuth Festspiele, and the formalism of Oskar Schlemmer's Total Theatre. Both understood institutional practice and architecture as extensions of artistic content. For Vinge/Müller, the result was a 120-seat theatre nestled inside a World War II munitions factory in the suburb of Reinickendorf. The theatre's coat of arms—a fox stalking a castle—directed audiences through vast industrial parking lots to a courtyard walled off by jet-black shipping containers, which titled the individual performances: "containers 1–9." A food truck, bar, and porto-potties satiated spectators over the ten performances, which ran upwards of twelve hours without intermission. Inside, seats were assigned by lottery—some at cabaret tables with dinner, others at standing stalls, most on wooden benches. One night, we scooped numbered ping-pong balls from a raffle drum; on the next they were tossed onto the floor of the lobby, sending spectators scrambling.

The performances were comprised of three interlocking universes that dramatized the institution: the theatre's character-employees that produced the *NTR* repertory; a child who imagined *NTR*; and Vinge/Müller's artistic team that ran the production. In the first, administrative and artistic staff members mounted *The Master Builder*, *Hedda Gabler*, *Tosca*, *Parsifal*, *Lohengrin*, and a comically reimagined *Psycho Hamlet: The Opera*. Never shown chronologically or in their totality, these stories overlapped with attention to the plays' offstage and imagined scenes: Solness built a castle in the sky and literally fought God; at his Mother's wedding feast, melancholy Hamlet threw cakes in the face of each fam-



Theatre architecture and scene of heaven
in *Nationaltheater Reinickendorf*.
(Photo: Julian Roeder.)