
PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Sarah Bay-Cheng, Editor

THE BOOK OF MORMON. Book, music, and lyrics by Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone. Directed and choreographed by Casey Nicholaw. Eugene O'Neill Theatre, New York City. 31 May 2011.

A collaboration between Julie Taymor, a theatre artist whom I admire, and two members of my favorite band, U2, promised to be a match made in musical heaven for me. However, this promise went unfulfilled when I saw *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* in its original version in January 2011. Famously tech-heavy, confusing, stylistically promiscuous, and even dangerous, the production left me little desire to return five months later upon its revision. Instead, I found my heaven, ironically, in “Spooky Mormon Hell [Dream]” and other cheeky, irreverent, and downright raunchy production numbers in Trey Parker, Robert Lopez, and Matt Stone’s *The Book of Mormon*. In spite of rather unmemorable tunes, the musical managed to create near-perfection by marrying traditional musical theatre structure with postmodern pastiche and contemporary relevance through the choreography, scenic design, and themes that explored such subjects as transition, American identity, and a longing for utopia.

The Book of Mormon (BOM) follows two squeaky-clean Mormon youths, Elder Price (Andrew Rannells) and Elder Cunningham (Josh Gad), on a reluctant mission to Africa (they were hoping for Orlando), where instead of finding eager converts they encounter a poverty- and AIDS-stricken village controlled by a warlord named “Butt Fucking Naked.” Predictable cultural misunderstandings and crises of faith ensue, but the interventions of an idealistic young villager named Nabalungi (Nikki M. James) under threat of female circumcision helps to unite the two worlds. *BOM* is about religion in all its complexities, but it is as much about transition: the Mormons’ from Western to non-Western culture, from boyhood to manhood, from cultural naïveté to awareness. Nabalungi shifts from abjection to

agency, her fellow Ugandans still moving from colonial victimization to postcolonial independence.

Parker and Stone, no strangers to movie musicals (*Cannibal! The Musical*; *South Park: Bigger, Longer & Uncut*), acknowledge the influence of Rodgers and Hammerstein on the structure of *BOM*. The girl-meets-boy story and familiar song types (optimistic opening number: “Hello!”; the “I want” character song: “Two by Two”; eleven o’clock number: “Joseph Smith American Moses”) are all present, as is a happy ending. By tapping into the conventions of the quintessential American musical, *BOM* mirrors the inherent American-ness of Mormonism, and the optimism exuded by the show through the rousing finale “Tomorrow Is a Latter Day” reflects the inherent optimism of the overall philosophy of the Latter Day Saints.

But the significance of *BOM* lays not in its following of traditions—exemplified so fully thematically and structurally in another religious-themed musical, *Fiddler on the Roof*—but in its break from them. This break was explicit in such aspects as the gay (albeit closeted) Mormon men’s chorus; the no-holds-barred profanity and irreverence (the “Hakuna Matata” parody “Hasa Diga Eebowai” translates as “Fuck You, God”); the talk of raping babies, maggots in the scrotum, the holy clitoris, and curing AIDS by fornicating with a frog. More implicitly, choreographer Casey Nicholaw’s pastiche of musical theatre dance styles subverted the more common tradition of choreographic homogeneity within a show. This radical mix of styles included Martha Graham-style Americana alongside rousing militaristic marches, as well as the repression-themed “Turn It Off,” replete with splashy tap finale, in contrast to the previous African-dance, polyrhythm-infused number “Hasa Diga Eebowai.” Even soul, in “All-American Prophet,” and hip-hop dance à la boy bands, in the hilarious “Man Up,” made appearances. Through all these disparate styles, Nicholaw consistently physicalized the optimistic spirit of Mormonism by choreographing largely to upbeat, fast-paced musi-



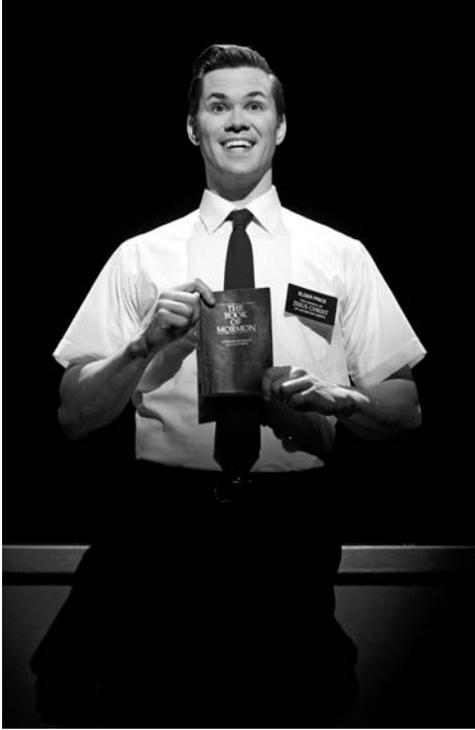
Nikki M. James (Nabulungi), Andrew Rannells (Elder Price), Josh Gad (Elder Cunningham), and ensemble in *The Book of Mormon*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

cal numbers, his dance vocabulary often vertical and extended upward, perhaps reaching for the utopic heaven toward which the Mormons—and eventually the Africans they encounter—strive.

Scott Pask, the current scenic boy wonder of Broadway, framed this choreography with an ever-present, majestic Mormon Tabernacle false proscenium, replete with stained glass and topped with the trumpeting angel Moroni. Within this frame he brilliantly combined multiple visual styles. In George Tsypin's designs for *Spider-Man*, this technique was an unfortunate hodgepodge, the overall aesthetic goals never clear. In *BOM*, it was an appropriate pastiche within a setting marked as a decidedly post-modern world, in which both the Mormon elders and Ugandans are called to question their grand religious/social metanarratives and at the same time accept cultural pluralism. Pask left no scenic fig leaf unturned in his visual storytelling, meeting not only these ideological demands, but also the pragmatic requirements of multiple and far-ranging locales on the intimate stage (installations, not moving scenery, are more common in the O'Neill). Scenes behind scrims and in shadowboxes depicted the history of Mormonism, a technique used to great effect in Pask's designs for *The Pillowman*. Actors performed scenes in Utah against his splendid,

flat-painted backdrops that shifted to reveal a contrasting three-dimensional African village combined with wing-and-drop. Like the number "Hasa Diga Eebowai," this setting suggested a tongue-in-cheek nod to *The Lion King*: a sun blazed in the sky with animals lying underneath, but these animals were carcasses, one dragged across the stage and another rotting, embedded in various detritus beneath the ramshackle huts. Multiple unit sets added layers of texture and detail, and scene shifts often were accomplished quickly with a filmic, closing iris. Finally, nearly everywhere one looked were doors, limens through which all the characters walked both literally and metaphorically in order to experience the transitions that are at the heart of *BOM*.

The Book of Mormon could be viewed by some as blasphemous; the official position of the Church of Latter Day Saints, according to lds.org, is that "[t]he production may attempt to entertain audiences for an evening, but the Book of Mormon as a volume of scripture will change people's lives forever by bringing them closer to Christ." Entertaining as the show was, it seemed more celebration of faith than blasphemy, and it conveyed relevant and touching themes about transition, cultural misunderstanding, American identity, and the longing for utopia. Its interrogation of what it means to



Andrew Rannells (Elder Price) in *The Book of Mormon*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

be “American” recalled, for me, similar questions raised by Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*, the luminous revival of which I had seen at the Signature Theatre Company the day after *Spider-Man*, and I hope that scholars take up this connection between Kushner’s masterwork and *BOM*. But considering the critical acclaim heaped upon Parker, Lopez, and Stone’s musical (and nine Tony Awards, including Best Musical), “masterwork” may be an appropriate word for it as well.

JUDITH SEBESTA
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LONDON ROAD. Book and lyrics by Alecky Blythe, music and lyrics by Adam Cork. Directed by Rufus Norris. Cottesloe Auditorium, National Theatre, London. 27 May 2011.

On the face of it, verbatim and musical theatre make improbable bedfellows: musicals tend to overstate and apply broad brush strokes, whereas

verbatim theatre attends to nuance and seeks hyper-naturalistic detail in representation; musicals favor high production values over the roughness of documentary theatre; and musicals are usually sunny, while documentary theatre is dour. Yet *London Road* demonstrated a surprising, uncanny symbiosis between the two forms. Both are often presentational in style: testimony obtained through interviews and recreated as a kind of direct address in performance parallels the musical’s use of song as confessional. Moreover, perhaps surprisingly, setting such testimony to music serves to focus attention on those words, just as documentary or verbatim theatre intends.

London Road suits particularly well a musical treatment and a concomitant emphasis on the ensemble, because it is primarily about the engendering of community spirit and neighborhood pride. Set in Ipswich in southeast England, the play captures the town as it responded to the murder of five prostitutes in late 2006. Diverse voices singing rousing choruses in harmony proved a powerful metaphor for the solidarity fostered among a group of residents on the street where the victims worked and the murderer lived. Also, but not unproblematically, they provided a pungent counterpoint to the forlorn plaints of the largely overlooked casualties of the crimes, the local prostitutes.

London Road emerged from a workshop for writers and composers at the National Theatre Studio in 2007, where composer and sound designer Adam Cork paired with verbatim theatre-maker Alecky Blythe. Working principally with her company Recorded Delivery since 2003, Blythe has created a series of plays (including *Come Out Eli*, *Cruising*, and *The Girlfriend Experience*) directly from testimony she recorded and edited. In Blythe’s productions, that testimony is relayed to actors via earphones. The actors not only speak the words of their subjects, but also faithfully reproduce accents and every stutter, hesitation, repetition, and inflexion.

With *London Road*, Blythe was obliged to dispense with the earphones in performance, although they were used in early rehearsals. Meanwhile, Cork transcribed the cadences and rhythms of particular speeches into musical lines and also composed his songs around other key phrases from the testimony. The musical references are eclectic: here a hint of techno, there the strains of a Christmas carol. The play comprises, therefore, a mixture of spoken testimony, *Sprechstimme*, and songs, with individual speeches woven into choruses sung by other members of the company. The sung delivery drew attention to not only the content of each speech, but also the idiosyncrasies of its iteration.



Members of the company in *London Road*.
(Photo: Helen Warner.)

The first scene highlighted the elision of the documentary material and its musical articulation. Blythe's original rather rough audio recording of the Neighbourhood Watch chairman's opening speech played over the PA system before actor Nick Holder started to sing the words of the recording. That scene, set in March 2008, also established the strong sense of communal solidarity and a markedly feel-good atmosphere as it built to a celebratory recollection of the London Road in Bloom competition inaugurated the previous summer in response to the traumatic events. Rufus Norris's slick production reinforced that feeling by deftly using costumes and props to signal characters, settings, and seasons.

However, the mood was not all upbeat. *London Road* is based on interviews conducted in Ipswich over eighteen months, beginning shortly after the discovery of the bodies. Accordingly, it documents a community under siege—first distressed by fear and suspicion, and then scrutinized under intense police and media surveillance. That sense of siege was powerfully encapsulated in a scene in which a white-overalled police officer wove back and forth across the stage with barrier tape, isolating and imprisoning the residents in a web of ever-more-restricted cordons. The production also conveyed the high degree of tension around the subsequent trial and its outcome: Did the accused, Steve Wright, do it? Would he be found guilty?

The play also draws sympathetic attention to those excluded from the community—the prostitutes who worked on London Road. Residents increasingly express resentment toward the “slags” and even gratitude that the murders rid the area of prostitution. Consequently, during the final scene, an audio of sex workers talking about their ostracism and diminished circumstances intruded poignantly on the festivities of the second London Road in Bloom competition. Unfortunately, complete

capitulation to musical convention meant that the moment was quickly eclipsed by a euphorically happy ending: a show-stopping reprise of the title tune, with myriad luxuriant hanging baskets and flower boxes festooning the stage. As if to redress this facile resolution, after the performance the actors solicited donations for the addicts' rehabilitation agency where Blythe interviewed the prostitutes.

Although the barbs perforating the exultant assertion of “Little Britain” were somewhat satisfying, the implicit judgment of the Suffolk community for its prejudice against the prostitutes pointed to another problematic aspect of the musical treatment. I could not help but feel uneasy for the people being judged: the eleven featured London Road residents who ingenuously provided the play's raw material. On the one hand, the play endows them with significance and even glamour and the production's early scenes represented them with dignity and affection. However, the translation from audio interview to musical performance seemingly invited a degree of expansion that led some actors to play higher status to their subjects; that is, their performances commented on their characters, encouraging us to laugh at these people and their manners. Meanwhile, the effusive representation of accoutrements of this lower-middle-class milieu—garden gnomes and statues—reinforced the patronizing note, especially before the National's metropolitan audience. Such disparagement may be a danger with verbatim theatre, but it is something that Blythe has otherwise avoided, as *Do We Look Like Refugees?!* playing contemporaneously in London conveniently demonstrated.

Although *London Road* effected a productive and exciting fusion of verbatim and musical theatre forms, it might have checked some of the latter's impulses in order to achieve a more satisfactory balance between honoring one's subjects and creating engaging entertainment.

STUART YOUNG
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MACBETH. By William Shakespeare. Directed by Michael Boyd. Royal Shakespeare Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon, UK. 26 April and 4 May 2011.

The inaugural production of the new Royal Shakespeare Theatre, extensively refurbished over a period of four years, was *Macbeth*, directed by the artistic director of the Royal Shakespeare Company, Michael Boyd. However, the real innovations of



Jonathan Slinger (Macbeth) in *Macbeth*. (Photo: Ellie Kurttz.)

the production were Boyd's drastic changes to the witches' scenes. Of the four scenes in which the witches appear, he entirely removed scenes 1.1 and 3.5, he cut Hecate, and he shortened scenes 1.3 and 4.1. Boyd cut about 85 percent of the witches' lines in all. In the remaining lines, the witches no longer talk among themselves, but only address Macbeth (Jonathan Slinger) and Banquo. While Boyd argued that many of these lines were written by Middleton anyway, his changes went beyond mere cutting. His production transformed the witches into children, later revealed to be the dead children of Macduff, and Boyd replaced all references in the text to "witches" with "children." The effect of these changes was profound, creating a *Macbeth* that was not only eerily haunting and vengeful, but also one that demonstrated the inevitability and circularity of the events played out onstage—a significant break from previous productions of *Macbeth* on the British stage.

The production opened with Duncan and Malcolm discussing the outcome of the battle. As Macbeth and Banquo entered, what appeared to be the corpses of three small children were lowered from above the stage, dangling on ropes as if they had been hanged. It was a startling and harrowing image. As they were lowered, they turned out to be children actors, who spoke the witches' prophecies to Macbeth and Banquo. The faces of the children, painted gray with a small black cross in the center, were at first devoid of any emotion, as they stared blankly into nothingness. Over the course of their prophesizing, they briefly laughed sarcastically in high-pitched voices, creating an ominous and surreal confrontation with Macbeth. These semi-dead "weird" children haunted not only in the witches' scenes, but also at other ominous and prophetic points in the play. When Lady Macbeth (Aislin McGuckin) heard the owl shriek, for instance, one of these children ran across the stage with a high-pitched, vengeful laugh. Their continuous presence added to the aura of doom and ever-present evil. This reached a visual climax when Macduff's children turned out to be the very same children, without the gray faces, whom Macbeth's soldiers brutally murdered onstage. The audible snapping of one of the children's neck and the bloody slicing of another's throat caused the audience to gasp.

This coup de théâtre turned the children into ghosts returned to haunt the living and confront them with the consequences of their evil actions. Boyd used this device previously in his acclaimed history cycle of 2007, where the ghosts in Shakespeare's eight history plays formed a pattern of dead characters come back to haunt the living in silent confrontations. Similarly, the children both

watched the action unfold, as when Macbeth was crowned king, and played an active part in avenging themselves upon him. When Birnam Wood moved toward the castle, the dead children, including their deceased mother (who was equally gray-faced), carried the tree branches. They effectively made up the soldiers of the army and helped fulfill the prophecy of Macbeth's downfall. In the final confrontation between Macbeth and Macduff, Macbeth emerged as the victor, but just before he delivered the killing blow, one of the children intervened by running past Macbeth, thus distracting him and allowing Macduff to slay his children's murderer instead. It resulted not only in an act of final retribution, but also created a poignant scene as Macduff (Aidan Kelly) was reminded of all he had lost, as he seemed to see his own dead children in his mind's eye.

Boyd's use of Macduff's dead children as witches emphasized the inevitability of Macbeth's descent into evil, as the consequences of his actions literally stared him in the face before he had even committed any acts. Boyd's production thus followed the direction of Jan Kott's vision of the "Grand Mechanism": the downfall of Macbeth not as the consequence of wrongly chosen actions, but as the result of an almighty manipulator. His downfall was from the opening a foregone conclusion—all that remained to be seen was how the evil deeds would unfold. Boyd further stressed the circularity of the action by casting Ross as a narrator, who first repeated the opening words of this production "Doubtful it stood" three times, before Malcolm picked them up and continued. At the end of the play, Ross once again repeated the first words of Malcolm's final speech "We shall not spend" three times, after which Malcolm continued. The wheel had come full circle, and the sense of déjà vu and inevitability that permeated this production was continued until the end. While there was no escaping the horror in this *Macbeth*—poignantly illustrated by the dead children—the real horror lay in the fact that it would happen over and over again, as the characters were unable to change the course of history.

Boyd's production radically revised the *Macbeth* most often produced on the British stage since World War II, in which the realization of the horrors of the Shoah and a growing interest in psychoanalysis have resulted in productions that either explored the deepest emotions and inner turmoil of Macbeth and his wife or else focused on the brutal face of evil in the rise and fall of an ambitious military man. While some notable productions, such as Gregory Doran's *Macbeth* in 1999, emphasized supernatural elements and gave the witches a prominent role, the focus remained on the characters of Macbeth and his wife. Boyd's textual alterations and reinterpretation of the witches as Macduff's dead chil-

dren highlighted the play as an endlessly repeating cycle of violence, vengeance, and murder that the characters were powerless to prevent.

It was a bleak *Macbeth* that Boyd offered, with no hope and little consolation: caught up in an inevitable vortex of doom, characters were drawn inexorably toward foregone conclusions. Fittingly, in such a bleak inner and outer landscape, the only reprieves offered were moments of heartfelt grief, such as those experienced by Macduff. However, even these were tentative, and the moving cello music that accompanied this production powerfully conveyed the solitude and lonely heartbreak of hope, offering only tiny, vulnerable increments of redemption in the bleak and unforgiving landscape.

COEN HEIJES

University of Groningen, the Netherlands

I AM THE WIND. By Jon Fosse. Translated by Simon Stephens. Directed by Patrice Chéreau. Young Vic, London, 21 May 2011; and Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, 6 June 2011.

Despite being hailed by some as the Beckett of the twenty-first century, as well as one of Europe's most distinguished and most performed playwrights for the past two decades, Jon Fosse has only recently received such admiration in the Anglo-American theatre. *I Am the Wind* (*Eg er vinden*, 2007) is a meditation on depression, suicide, identity, and loss that probes the interior reaches of our depressive society. This highly anticipated co-production of the Young Vic and the Théâtre de la Ville, Paris, featured one of contemporary British theatre's most important writers, Simon Stephens (providing an English-language version of Fosse's terse Norwegian Nynorsk), and one of France's most celebrated directors, Patrice Chéreau, notably creating his first production in English. In this production, Chéreau's directorial approach to Fosse was quite different from that of his compatriot Claude Régy's, whose admired productions of *Quelqu'un va venir* (1999) and *Variations sur la mort* (2003) were celebrated for their hypnotic manipulation of audience perception. With *I Am the Wind*, Chéreau emphasized desire rather than perception, clarity rather than obscurity, presenting Fosse so that his English-speaking audience could appreciate the author at his most lyrical, and also be astonished at arresting moments of theatrical awareness.

I Am the Wind had a strong tonal affinity to Chéreau's cinematic adaptation of Phillipe Besson's novel *Son Frère* (2003), whose two central characters



Jack Laskey (The Other) and Tom Brooke (The One) in *I Am the Wind*. (Photo: Simon Annand.)

are also negotiating their emotional solitude where the land disappears into the sea. The sea provides an unceasing "silent" force in Chéreau's film and likewise is a central motif in several of Fosse's plays. Rivaling that of even Synge and O'Neill, Fosse's sea became the scenic and psychological core of this drama of negotiated self-abnegation. The play presented an extended exchange between two men (or perhaps it was just one man conversing with his own Other) about the ideation and act of suicide. Shifting seamlessly from aftermath to action and back again, the play related the story of The One's loss at sea, deconstructing his emotional state before presenting the flashback voyage of a relationship (or identity) adrift: "I didn't want to / I just did it / You just did it / I just did it," the play begins. The "it"—The One's apparent suicide—is the central action and question of this lyrical drama, and Chéreau's production, particularly in its acting and scenography, highlighted both the extreme intimacy and extreme discomfort of considering such an act.

Even before the first words were spoken, the production provided an affecting tableau. Two men—one shirtless, barefooted, and noticeably more pale and frail (as if drowned)—appeared on a desolate shore, embarkation and aftermath of the desperate voyage. The Other (Jack Laskey) stood cradling



Jack Laskey (The Other) in *I Am the Wind*.
(Photo: Simon Annand.)

The One (a haunting Tom Brooke) in his arms, the two sustaining a breathless *pietà*, seemingly to the limit of the actors' physical endurance. From the outset, the audience was both riveted by the striking intimacy of the image and discomfited by its physical exertion. Unlike the perceptual disorientation encouraged by Régy's seminal productions of Fosse, Chéreau clearly suspended his audience between desire (empathy) and theatrical awareness (distance).

But were these figures friends? Lovers? The audience could never really know, because the play itself confounds character and relationship and seemingly eschews any cultural supertext to explore something more existential. With dialogue that sounded vaguely psychotherapeutic, Fosse's examination of the depressive ego was poignant and truthful, as anyone who has pondered suicide might attest. Swedish critic Leif Zern reads much of Fosse's dramaturgy as parallel to the psychodynamics prevalent in the turn from neurosis to depression that characterizes our changed view of human suffering in postmodernity. In Chéreau's production, The One is not in neurotic conflict with The Other—quite the contrary—but rather is failing to articulate his distress, failing to express, failing to imagine. Brooke and Laskey captured the passivity of this failure perfectly, even as their adroit corporal expression (a Chéreau trademark) presented an awe-inspiring physical struggle with the elemental forces conjured by Fosse's text.

The scenography for the production also highlighted the balance between desire and theatrical awareness. Richard Peduzzi's design was a characteristically stark environment that provided several breathtaking phenomenal effects. The first responded to Fosse's stage direction at the beginning of the text: "The boat and the actions that surround it should be evoked or suggested rather than rep-

resented mimetically." The entire setting consisted of a large expanse of murky brownish water—more industrial than oceanic—backed by an unobtrusive though framed, bluish-gray cyclorama. The theatre spaces in both London and Paris had most of their audience looking downward onto the pool of water, which at the beginning of the play seemed to be drying up, caking mud onto its banks, looking more like the aftermath of a flooded cellar than the treacherous imaginary sea that it would become. When the space was quickly flooded with what seemed like a deluge of even more water, a simple rectangular structure surprisingly arose from center stage to evoke the boat. This theatrical "machine" provided an instrument of visual rhythm that hovered and spun over the water, moving in various configurations and creating different raked articulations of space for the actors to engage. Its movements also continually reinforced the oceanic soundscape to create the effect of the winds on the sea and vessel. When, toward the end of the play, the "boat" swiftly receded beneath the stage, the rush of water draining back to the original environment was equally stunning.

As impressive as the boat's appearance, disappearance, and movement were, the production's scenography provided two additionally captivating moments of theatrical awareness that reinforced the play's lyricism. First, as the boat was moored in the cove and a peaceful calm descended for a moment, a swirl of white foam slowly emerged from underneath and dispersed over the water, creating a tranquilly beautiful aleatoric pattern. As a result of using real materials in real time, this diffusion of foam on water created an intense phenomenal effect, one that brought into awareness the distinctive evanescence of theatrical performance, which thereby resonated with the transience of the questioned life of depressive The One. Even more subtly, during a brief temporal transition toward the end of the play, the lighting (Dominique Bruguière) created an eerie reflection of the rippling water on the walls and ceiling of the entire theatre space so that it felt as if the audience itself was being immersed in a "luminous darkness." (Leif Zern's recently translated, and essential, book on Fosse bears this evocative title.) Such moments of extreme phenomenal awareness were a highlight of Chéreau's production, which rather than being disorienting, implicated the audience in Fosse's searching mysticism.

DAVID G. MULLER
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OUR LADY OF THE UNDERPASS. By Tanya Saracho. Directed by Sandra Marquez. 16th Street Theater and Teatro Vista, Berwyn, Chicago. 11 April 2010.

The sound of the freeway stayed with me as I settled into the fifty-seat auditorium of the 16th Street Theater. Piped into the house as part of the sound design and removed from the context of unwieldy traffic, the buzz of passing cars created an unexpected calming effect. The commute into the city was hectic as usual. The radio news spoke of the Vatican sex scandal and I anticipated drawing some ironic connections between the trouble in Rome and the play. After all, it was performed five years after an image of the Virgin Mary was recognized on a Chicago underpass following the loss of Pope John Paul II and the commission of Pope Benedict XVI. Commuter Obdulia Delgado had no way of knowing that what she perceived as an image of the Virgin would create gridlock in public debate as religious pilgrims, predominantly from Latino and Polish immigrant communities, erected a roadside shrine that, quite literally, stopped traffic.

A performance in and of itself, this original shrine and its followers were formally commemorated in Teatro Vista's staging of Tanya Saracho's *Our Lady of the Underpass*. Based on interviews with visitors to the site, Saracho's "theatre of testimony" exemplified what performance scholar Jack Santino describes as a "performative commemorative." If, as Santino argues, roadside memorials mark a loss or death within a community, so too did Teatro Vista's production memorialize the underpass shrine, now eclipsed under palimpsestic layers of graffiti. Furthermore, the play served as a backdrop for the expression of more personal, political, and cultural absences marked by the shrine. For example, with the erection of the memorial, immigrant Catholic communities left their cultural mark on a cityscape that had increasingly ignored them through gentrification. Through the testimonies of the site's visitors, Saracho restored immigrant voices that she considered to have "politically and socially . . . gone voiceless." Similarly, as the only Equity Latino theatre company in the Midwest, Teatro Vista's production staked out cultural territory for ethnic theatre that is underrepresented within the city's larger arts community.

Our Lady of the Underpass's restoration began with Brian Sidney Bembridge's scenic design of the image—what some claimed was the silhouette of the Virgin Mary left by a salt stain on a concrete underpass wall—before its obfuscation. Two yellow sawhorses barricaded the audience from the set, turning the spectators in this intimate house into

a re-creation of a small crowd gathered at the site. As the house lights dimmed, a sense of ritualistic reverence and social relevance pervaded the space. A streak of headlights projected onto Bembridge's reconstruction of the underpass wall slowly dissolved into the glow of altar candles. Graffiti etchings were revealed as prayers on behalf of loved ones in the hospital or at war in Afghanistan. The hum of traffic merged into a polyglot of Latin, English, Spanish, and Polish prayers as pilgrims, who served as chorus throughout the play, entered with crosses, flowers, and pictures of the late pope, leaving their offerings at the foot of the sawhorses that now served as prayer rails. Through subtle design choices the minimalistic though ample set was transformed into what one character described as an "urban altar"—a small reclamation of sacred space within the sprawling concrete city.

The reverence of the production's opening moment soon gave way to humor in a series of monologues based on Saracho's interactions with visitors: Tony, "The Deacon" (Juan Gabriel Ruiz), an El Salvadorian who considered himself the Virgin's protector; Ofelia, "La Tia" (Charin Alvarez), an illegal immigrant who prayed for the health of her infirm nephew; Matt, "The Jogger" (Chris Cantelmi), irritated that his route had been inconvenienced by the "city's unfortunates"; Magdalena, "The Healer" (Amanda Powell), a nurse who brought her Polish mother to the site; Terri, "The Huppie" (Suzette Mayobre), a Hispanic yuppie; and Mrs. Shriver, "The Liberal" (Rosie Newton). Taken as a whole, the monologues mirrored the public debate that erupted over the site, including issues of faith, immigration, and city infrastructure. By satirizing the social stereotypes that emerged in the wake of the Virgin's discovery, both director and playwright revealed the biases and social divisions within the community.

Perhaps the most striking example of comedy used to this effect was the character of Terri, an



Charin Alvarez (Ofelia, "La Tia") in *Our Lady of the Underpass*. (Photo: Anthony Aicardi.)

upwardly mobile Hispanic yuppie (stereotyped as “hippie”) who finds her fiancé’s “precious delights” in the form of *mierda* (shit) left in odd places around their apartment—part of an apparent sexual fetish. Terri vehemently denies visiting the site because of her Hispanic heritage, therefore sneaking to the shrine in the middle of the night wearing ridiculous pink pajamas and Uggs boots. What appears more ridiculous, however, is Terri’s covert effort to hide her ethnicity under the veneer of designer clothes in the darkness of midnight—a walking testament to the secretive, superficial, and “shitty” pretenses of gentrification. Despite her extreme efforts to hide her identity, Terri confesses: “This is the only place that makes sense to me right now.” Not afraid to laugh *with* situations and social stereotypes that might be perceived as outrageous—hippie, jogger, deacon, liberal—the production derived its humor from its characters’ revelations of things they would normally be too polite to say in public, including racial, religious, and social biases. These satirical, yet also authentic, depictions of the people directly involved in the memorial drew attention to divisions within the community and suggested commonality among the individuals.

The production’s comic moments, however, were not to be mistaken for ridicule. Saracho, director Sandra Marquez, and the ensemble actively resist mocking at the expense of those who believed. More than one character noted that news coverage of the underpass phenomenon ridiculed it as a sort of Hispanic “worshipping wall.” Conversely, Saracho’s humor gave voice to those silenced in the media. As Magdalena pointedly complained, Americans think “immigrants must be dumb.” She retorted that “Americans are dumb. Do they know the capital of Poland? And they come here and make fun of our faith? . . . What’s wrong with making this a holy place?” In response to Magdalena’s question, the production successfully endowed the space with holiness. When “The Jogger” threw his gum against the wall, an audible reaction of shock and disgust erupted from the audience.

Transitioning between monologues, actors returned to the chorus as personal prayers gave way to sardonic sociopolitical collects like “Stave off the Yuppies, Heavenly Mother. Save us from the gentrification!” Independently and collectively, the ensemble of *Our Lady of the Underpass* voiced a diversity of community increasingly absented through hegemonic forces. The challenge of having an autonomous voice amid the hegemony is not lost on Teatro Vista, which, in this instance, performed as guest artists in a Chicago neighborhood that is in the process of gentrification.

Both the original apparition and Saracho’s play illustrate the performative commemorative, in that

they “insist” and “insert” the voices of Chicago’s ethnic communities into a larger discourse on culture, tradition, and identity. Noteworthy, too, was the broader community acceptance of such expression when mediated through the culturally privileged position of the professional theatre. Despite its position in a professional theatre in a gentrified neighborhood, Saracho’s play memorialized the Virgin within the “funerary tradition” in order to place issues of gentrification, immigration, and cultural identity before an aggregate theatre audience.

As the performance concluded, slides of the actual urban altar and its visitors were projected onto the scenic underpass wall. Some audience members stayed to view the images, and others who began to make their way out of the theatre turned back in a gesture of reverence. This was both the testimony and effect of Saracho’s play, which documented an important though disregarded moment in the spiritual history of Chicago. Although the original Virgin has disappeared from the underpass wall, her presence was resurrected in *Our Lady of the Underpass*. Through this production, Saracho, Marquez, and Teatro Vista extended the repertoire of the performative commemorative beyond the roadside cross and onto the shrine of the stage, illuminating the form and function behind this example of theatre of testimony.

KARI-ANNE INNES

Bowling Green State University

THE PEOPLE IN THE PICTURE. Book and lyrics by Iris Rainer Dart. Music by Mike Stoller and Artie Butler. Directed by Leonard Foglia. Musical staging by Andy Blankenbuehler. Roundabout Theatre Company, Studio 54, New York City. 26 April 2011.

For those who constantly bemoan the demise of the “original musical” on Broadway, the riches of the 2010–11 season were especially abundant: twelve new musicals, two-thirds with original (rather than jukebox) scores, and only a few based on popular movies. Even more unusual was that three of these new musicals debuted “cold,” without public productions prior to Broadway. The anticipation of unknown, new musicals inevitably produces great expectations, but if such shows occasionally receive rapturous response (*The Book of Mormon*), they are more often met by sighs of disappointment (*Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*). But the extreme reactions engendered by the high stakes of Broadway musicals inevitably hide the more mod-



Donna Murphy (Bubbie) and Rachel Resheff (Jenny) in *The People in the Picture*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

est rewards. Such is the case with *The People in the Picture*. If far from perfect, this new musical merits attention not only because it finds humor in the darkest of places, as does *The Book of Mormon*, nor even because it privileges female familial and social bonds, as in *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*; including both of these aspects, *The People in the Picture* goes beyond to create a complex, even uneasy juxtaposition of past and present, memory and performance.

The People in the Picture dramatizes how one can change the present by reliving the past, how one's present circumstances impact the (re)construction of this past, and how the way one chooses to narrate the events of one's life—expressed here as “rewriting life to be happy”—can both hurt and heal. Bubbie, an elderly woman facing death in 1977 New York City, decides to finally tell her granddaughter Jenny about “the people in the picture” of a 1930s Yiddish theatre troupe. Bubbie—then known as Raisel—was one of the “Warsaw Gang,” artists who used humor as a strategy for dealing with the horrific events of 1930s and '40s Poland. Bubbie continues this storytelling strategy with her granddaughter, no small feat for a woman who barely survived the Holocaust. Bubbie's daughter Red has long disavowed

these stories, refusing to acknowledge their importance and dissuading Bubbie from telling them to Jenny or teaching her a word of Yiddish. Eventually the play reveals and ameliorates the antipathy between Red and Bubbie by acknowledging the people in *another* picture, one that represents some of the difficult, even secret choices Raisel had to make in order to save her young daughter.

The slippage between memory and performance threaded throughout the musical production, beginning with the set design. The set was at first glance a collection of picture frames, dominated by an enormous gilded frame that tilted out toward the audience. Closer inspection revealed that some frames lacked a bottom edge and therefore more closely resembled proscenium arches, allowing the characters to exist simultaneously as both representations of a fixed past and actors in an uncertain present. The evocative lighting and projections, often faded like old photographs, emphasized the haunting presence of the past. The projection screen, which had filled the giant gilded frame, disappeared at the end of act 1, perhaps to signify the increasing violence and the incipient Warsaw Ghetto. That projections in act 2 were shown on a brick wall may have been intended to suggest the starkness of the ghetto, the

loss of recognizable support structures, or the ease with which initially sharp images of the past fade into the background. But this sharp scenic contrast between acts was at odds with the rest of the show, in which the past and present, the real and imagined, the fictional stories and lived truths were in constant flux.

This constant flux of past and present was best embodied in Donna Murphy's extraordinary performance. As both Bubbie and Raisel, Murphy expertly shifted between the two ages of this same character, using only a kerchief, glasses, and her own body to effect the transformation. But Murphy's performance involved more than just physical and gestural work: Bubbie sees and talks to her compatriots as ghosts, whereas Raisel interacts with them as living people. This is a subtle yet profound distinction and Murphy was exceptional at distinguishing Bubbie's memories from Raisel's lived experience, often moving from one to the other within a sentence. In her song "Selective Memory," Murphy went even further: in capturing both ages simultaneously, she magically became ageless.

If it was not often clear whether the other characters onstage were memories from the past or ghosts haunting the present, *The People in the Picture* wisely embraced this ambiguity, allowing them to be both at the same time. That Bubbie's granddaughter can see the characters in Bubbie's memories highlighted Jenny's openness to her family history. Rachel Resheff performed decently as Jenny, although she seemed too adult in her somewhat forced attempts at playing a girl who understands all that her mother cannot. Since Jenny's mother Red disavows these stories, she cannot see Raisel's troupe; Red assumes that Bubbie is talking to people who are not there and takes it as a sure sign of her impending demise. Red's resistance to her own history is echoed in the score; whereas most of the score is infused with klezmer music, Red's songs evidence no trace of Yiddish influence. As Red, Nicole Parker gave a standout performance; Parker did not simply replace Red's initial anger toward her mother with a newfound sympathy and understanding, but she deftly integrated these emotions into her portrayal as the musical progressed.

Just as Bubbie often rewrites her stories to highlight the happier moments, Iris Rainer Dart took a similar approach with the musical's book. Dart glossed over the depressing aspects of the events and focused instead on broad humor and melodramatic storylines. The major plot points were communicated without much subtlety or shading, mirroring the musical's representation of Yiddish theatre tropes. If this might be defended as a conscious stylistic choice, it nevertheless became wear-

ing; indeed, some of the best scenes were those with only movement and no speaking. For instance, the second act opened with a dance in which archives were hidden in milk cans, an intriguing bit of staging by Andy Blankenbuehler that only suffered after the fact by a didactic explanation of what had just happened. Blankenbuehler, best known for the Latin and hip-hop choreography in *In the Heights*, seemed an odd choice for this material, but his atmospheric style (he choreographs movement to happen around the stage throughout the show, rather than just in isolated dance numbers) perfectly suited a show so concerned with the persistence of memory. In fact, the biggest drawback of *The People in the Picture* was that by focusing so prominently on how humor gets people through difficult situations, Dart and her collaborators risked a certain triviality. I missed some emotional complexity, especially in the supporting characters. While humor is a valid strategy for coping, one does not make jokes *all* the time.

However, if the Warsaw Gang bordered on being stock Yiddish theatre characters, this was primarily a function of Dart's book, rather than any fault of the excellent performers. Yet as good as the men were, especially musical theatre stalwarts Alexander Gemignani, Chip Zien, and Christopher Innvar, *The People in the Picture* is primarily a musical about women. Midway through act 2 the men left the stage and the women sang "Saying Goodbye": Murphy (as both Bubbie and Raisel) was joined by the adult Red, the young Red (a surprisingly large-lunged Andie Mechanic), and Red's adoptive mother Dobrisch (a heart-breaking Megan Reinking). With Jenny watching on, this scene epitomized not only the matrilineality of Judaism, but also the ways in which multiple generations of women might relate to one another across seemingly impassable spatial and temporal divides. Past and present affect each other in surprising, even revolutionary ways, and this, perhaps even more than the strategy of rewriting life to be happy, is what lies at the heart of *The People in the Picture*.

DAN DINERO
New York University

FOLLIES. Book by James Goldman. Music and Lyrics by Stephen Sondheim. Directed by Eric Schaeffer. The Kennedy Center, Eisenhower Theatre, Washington, DC. 11 June 2011.

Even before the orchestra played the first notes, the audience was already seeing ghosts. Spectral

showgirls lingered silently in the corners and glided smoothly along the catwalks of the three-story set, living elements of the opening *mise en scène*. The Kennedy Center's 2011 revival of *Follies* filled the theatre with phantoms. While the actors' bodies made tangible the spirits written into the show by James Goldman and Stephen Sondheim, other more-elusive ghosts—specters of the musical's past productions, memories of all-star casts, and echoes of now-cliché musical styles—were conjured by the familiar faces of the actors and thought-provoking stage pictures. It would be easy to dismiss this production as just another revival among many. In the last few decades, American stages have certainly seen their share of resuscitated storylines and songs, including both revivals of past musical theatre favorites, and the emergence of new musicals based on popular movies and music. Functioning as a reflection on theatre's instinct toward revival, this (re)production of *Follies* challenged the inherent impulse toward nostalgia, while confronting the consequences of reviving and reliving the past. Invoking multiple levels of memory through its staging, casting, and tone, the Kennedy Center's restoration served as a valuable commentary on the current state of the Broadway musical industry, even as it somewhat ironically perpetuated the status quo.

Originally produced in 1971, the musical has seen many revivals, including a 1985 Lincoln Center concert and 1987 West End production, both of which significantly rewrote and reconceived the original. Whereas the London production exemplified a decidedly optimistic tone, the Kennedy Center's revival (with Bernadette Peters as Sally, Jan Maxwell as Phyllis, Danny Burstein as Buddy, and Ron Raines as Ben) returned to and even amplified the sardonic feeling of the original, transforming the characters' trips down memory lane from experiences of saccharine nostalgia into heart-wrenching melancholy. Choosing to embrace the darker side of Sondheim and Goldman's creation, director Eric Schaeffer repeatedly placed the past alongside the present through his use of the space and his nuanced interpretation of the title theme, the folly of reviving the past.

Set in a crumbling theatre, *Follies* opens with the past performers of the fictional Weismann Follies reuniting on their old stage to revisit and bid adieu to the past. The three-story set, painted in dismal hues of gray, emphasized the years gone by. As the characters arrive in the space, the memories pour forth—echoes of songs already sung, longings for relationships lost. In Sondheim and Goldman's creation, these memories materialize. Doubled by her or his younger self, youthful incarnations shadow each elder character throughout the show. In Schaeffer's interpretation, ghostly showgirls lingered on



Ron Raines (Ben), Bernadette Peters (Sally), Lora Lee Gayer (Young Sally), and Nick Verina (Young Ben) in *Follies*. (Photo: Joan Marcus.)

the catwalks from beginning to end, silently looming over the reunion. For the characters, the memories begin as enjoyable, harmless recollections (exemplified in "Rain on the Roof" by vaudeville couple Emily and Theodore), yet they turn to destructive revelations. For example, Ben seemingly reignites his affair with Sally in "Too Many Mornings", only to reject her at the number's close, just as he had years before. This ill-fated rekindling of Ben and Sally's romance in turn outrages their spouses, who respond angrily in Buddy's "The Right Girl" and Phyllis's "Could I Leave You?" By the show's intermission, acts of remembrance bring both couples to the brink of divorce.

In the Kennedy Center's production, the physical bodies of the actors onstage complicated the process of revival and repetition by emphasizing the destruction done to the present. Schaeffer's use of Derek McLane's scenic design positioned the past as a consistent force on the present; the weight of the memories, made tangible by the presence of the ghosts stacked in two stories of catwalks, clung to the crumbling old theatre and threatened to demolish the characters as it pulled the walls down around them. Under Schaeffer's direction, the youthful counterparts of the characters haunted the present-day incarnations, following them so insistently that we could not help but compare the past and the present, the young and the old. The presence of Young Sally and Young Ben, who in "Too Many Mornings" doubled the actions and lyrics, emphasized the eternal repetition of Ben's rejection and the devastation it wreaked on the older if not wiser Sally. Similarly, when the Weismann girls lined up to perform their old tap routine in "Who's That Woman?" each dancer was shadowed by her ghost-self on the crowded stage. The quaint nostalgia conjured by the characters' initial reminiscing shifted to ironic reflection as mature voices reprised their once-youthful ones and

aging bodies resurrected dances created in youth. While part of the number's fun lay in watching the older characters' charming but ultimately flawed attempts to recollect and restore their show-stopper to the stage as their younger selves sang and danced alongside them, their inability to resuscitate their performance was in stark contrast to the skilled and able bodies representing their original. Thus the production became a reflection on the restaging and reminiscences of the theatre itself, invoking the previous performances and continually haunted by the show's iconic performers.

Memories of both performers and performances were stimulated particularly by this production's use of its featured actors. Built into *Follies* are several show-stopping numbers that, although incidental to the plot, allow for well-known performers to showcase their talents and provide an opportunity for audiences to call upon their prior knowledge. Although the original cast featured several Broadway newcomers, revivals of *Follies* have drawn many seasoned veterans of the stage to leading and supporting roles, a trend culminating in the Kennedy Center's production and its forty-one-person cast. Performances by Elaine Page and Linda Lavin in particular were thick with the ghosts of their former roles, due in no small part to the show's press. Page's prior performance as Evita and Lavin's as Alice (roles mentioned in almost every article that named either woman) stood alongside the actors who created them, just as Weismann soprano Heidi Schiller was shadowed by the ghost of her younger coloratura self in the moving duet "One More Kiss." As Page sang "I'm Still Here" as Carlotta Campion, her sardonic delivery of lyrics like "Top billing Monday, Tuesday you're touring in stock; but I'm here" flickered with the presence of roles Page has embodied, placing echoes of Evita and Grizabella next to Carlotta on the stage. While it is certainly not unusual for Broadway shows to feature well-known performers (and bank on the public's ability to recognize them), *Follies* points a critical finger at our willingness to glorify the past. By casting celebrities and promoting their iconic roles in the press, emphasizing who the actors used to play and how they used to perform, this production mandated a comparison between past with present, a process that the main characters begin in the second act of the show.

As the characters regret their decisions and question why they returned to meet their pasts, the run-down theatre is replaced in the second act with the set of "Loveland," a visually dazzling vaudeville fantasy. In this production, the transformation was severe. The faded nostalgia of the dilapidated playhouse was replaced by a glaring, caustic environment that reflected the characters' inner turmoil.

In the blink of an eye, giant bands of flowers in phosphorescent fuchsia replaced the muted grays and browns of the dilapidated Weismann Theatre. The floral background glowed in various colors throughout the dream sequence, shifting to a sultry blue for Phyllis's "The Story of Lucy and Jesse" and deep, passionate red for Sally's "Losing My Mind." The size of the backdrop and the saturated colors used to light it emphasized the heightened emotions evoked by the characters' excursions into their pasts.

In Loveland, the pastiche popular music that fills the first act of Sondheim's libretto also became loud, garish, and destructive. The segment begins with "You're Gonna Love Tomorrow" / "Love Will See Us Through," a quartet featuring the young incarnations of Ben, Sally, Phyllis, and Buddy. As directed by Schaeffer, the song echoed the opening numbers of the production with its wistful sentimentality, only to quickly turn to bitterness and regret in "Buddy's Blues." While musically fashioned as a comic vaudeville melody, the number erased any nostalgic yearnings by illustrating Buddy's desperate unhappiness. Danny Burstein's Buddy moved furiously through the song and dance, dropping his forced smile only when the number ended and he slowly and sadly exited the stage. Through Sondheim's employment of these pastiche songs and styles at a moment when the characters are raw with emotion, melancholic longing for the good old days quickly melts away to reveal the harsh reality of the present. As the characters are pulled out of Loveland's fantasy, they are hit squarely with the truth of their present circumstances and must return to their lives, battered and in some cases broken by their excursion through the past. This transformation, highlighted in Schaeffer's rendition, ironically critiqued Broadway's current penchant for repetition and reproduction, even as it participated in the process.

Follies, like its major characters and indeed like all revivals, was always shadowed by previous productions. Although part of the pleasure in seeing a revival is our awareness of the ghosts, as *Follies* suggests, when re-creation overwhelmingly replaces creation we must consider whether the reminiscing is worthwhile or is detrimental to the future of musical theatre writing. When *Follies* transferred to Broadway in September 2011, it joined five other revivals and eleven other productions based on recycled material (there were only two original musicals, *Memphis* and *The Book of Mormon*). While it would be a stretch to argue that this production is an indictment of the current state of Broadway musicals, *Follies* warns its audiences that nostalgia for the past can be detrimentally seductive, corrupting both our present and our future.

ANNMARIE T. SAUNDERS

University of Maryland, College Park

SWAMPOODLE. By Tom Swift. Directed by Jo Mangan. Washington Coliseum, Washington, DC. 27 May 2011.

Less than a mile and a half from the United States Capitol building and lost among the District of Columbia's iconic monumental architecture rests a dilapidated building known variously as the Uline Arena or the Washington Coliseum. Now used as a parking garage, this shell of a structure formerly played host to some of the most significant events in pop culture history, most of which have been either forgotten or overshadowed by the rest of the city. *Swampoodle*, co-produced by Solas Nua and the Performance Corporation, attempted to rekindle the memory of those historical events and to reclaim the glory days of the arena. Through the historical yet disjointed narrative of the script and fractured exploration of the space, with action taking place in various alcoves around the arena, as well as among the audience and in distorted audio and grainy video projections of footage from the 1950s and '60s, the production produced a meditation on the fragility of history and memory that successfully embodied the past, even as it illuminated the arena's ghosts for a modern audience.

The Uline Arena, which opened in 1941 and was renamed the Washington Coliseum in 1959, served as an athletic venue as well as hosting other major



Karl Quinn in *Swampoodle*. (Photo: Shauna Alexander.)

events, such as the Beatles' American premiere two days prior to their historic appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. Over the next half century, the arena held a Malcolm X rally, Will Roger's Follies, and Rudolph Nureyev's performance with the Royal Ballet, along with various other events. By the 1990s, the arena had become a trash-collection facility before its current function as a parking garage.

The play *Swampoodle* took place entirely within the arena. As the audience made its way into the cavernous space via a large garage door, a custodian (Michael John Casey) called the people in and recited a brief history of the space and the neighborhood. Structured as a series of episodes, the main narrative provided a historical overview of the arena and the surrounding neighborhood. Rather than a typical linear account, the various scenes and vignettes often occurred independently and seemingly unattached to their adjacent dramatic moments. At one point, an actor stood on some rubble and recited lines from *Hamlet*; moments later, in another part of the space, a bulldozer demolished a set of living room furniture. Later on, a multitude of vignettes were presented simultaneously around the periphery of the arena: a 1950s crooner singing, ballet dancers performing a routine, a worker piling bags of garbage into a corner—all creating a montage of the past lives of the arena.

Without seating, the audience was left to stand on the floor of the arena. The action of the play occurred throughout the space in various nooks and alcoves, sometimes at a distance from the audience, sometimes with actors moving directly through the crowd. Audience members moved throughout the space as they followed the action, which drew attention to the architecture of the space itself, as though the arena were a character in its own right. Without a single focal point for the audience to watch, portions of the action were lost as a scene at one end of the arena gave way to a subsequent vignette in another part of the space. At the beginning, I attempted to keep up by moving into better positions to see each scene, but after a while I became content to just wait for a scene to arrive in my field of view, as opposed to moving throughout the space.

Just as there were portions of the action that were visually lost due to the staging, a large portion of the spoken dialogue was similarly incomprehensible due to excessive echoes and distortions from the microphones. While these continual audio and visual disconnects might seem detrimental to the performance, they appeared to be part of the larger framework for the production. Indeed, the media techniques that should have connected the audience to the performance proved to be an obstruction to its access. Because of the video configurations, the

audience missed pieces of dialogue or were unable to see certain scenes. Thus elements of the production became much like the history of this arena that, even in an age of media documentation, is being lost and forgotten. At first, I thought that these were technical glitches, but as they persisted I increasingly saw these mediated distortions as integral parts, and perhaps even the causes, of a crumbling of history and loss of memory, compounded by an almost lamentable tone from the actors as they attempted to present the past.

Near the end of the performance the production made one last attempt to awaken the arena's ghosts by projecting grainy black-and-white newsreel footage from bygone days on the massive walls of the space. Here was the arena in its glory days: the Beatles singing, Nureyev dancing, Will Rogers on his horse. Drawing from the archive, the visual elements of history are displayed, and the ghosts on the filmstrips are allowed to inhabit the space once again. As we exited the arena the cast stood on either side of the large door that lead out to the street. The process of leaving the theatre through the bodies of the performers created a transition from the world of the past to that of the present, amid the feeling that these ghosts will continue to inhabit this space after we were gone.

The arena is not a tourist attraction like the other historical locations of Washington. Outwardly dilapidated and covered with graffiti, there is nothing on its exterior to suggest what the building once housed. *Swampoodle* tried to reclaim history, both in the immediate sense of literally performing the history of the arena and in a broader way of returning the space to its former glory as a performance venue. For the weeklong run of *Swampoodle* the space once again hosted an audience, and not automobiles. Now the play has closed, leaving behind more ghosts, and the Washington Coliseum has returned to its regular day job as a parking garage.

JEFFREY SCOTT
Washington, D.C.

I'VE NEVER BEEN SO HAPPY. Book and lyrics by Kirk Lynn. Music and lyrics by Peter Stopschinski. Directed by Thomas Graves and Lana Lesley. Rude Mechanicals, The Off Center, Austin, TX. 23 April 2011.

The intermission of Austin-based Rude Mechanicals' latest production *I've Never Been So Happy* refreshingly departed from tradition. Instead of the typical quick break, the audience ventured outside



Meg Sullivan (Annabelle) in *I've Never Been So Happy* (Photo: Bret Brookshire.)

the theatre to participate in a Western-themed "transmedia shindig" that featured interactive, carnival-inspired amusements. At the "Messin' with Texas" station, audience members threw wet pieces of paper at a giant map of the state; at "Land Grab," they decided whether to develop parcels of land for profit or for the common good; and at the "Clothes Horse" station, people picked out Western attire to wear for the duration of the show, transforming themselves into part of the performance. During this playful intermission, Rude Mechs presented attractions that seemed at first familiar, but contained unexpected twists that quickly made the familiar strange. The company explored this theme more fully, and to thought-provoking effect, in the production itself.

Although Rude Mechs have attracted national attention before, most recently with *The Method Gun* (2008), *I've Never Been So Happy* represented a new level of creative collaboration and innovation for the experimental theatre collective. *I've Never Been So Happy*, which the company called a "western musical extravaganza," exuberantly explored the tension between nostalgia for an imagined past and dreams of a different kind of future. Stylistically, the company both deployed and subverted common elements of musical theatre, a choice that served to reinforce thematic tensions between old and new. Ultimately, the show argued that to create new models of being in the world, we must simultaneously break free from the chains of nostalgia and reject utopian visions of the future. The show's message to dig deeply into the present and create our own mythologies has the potential to resonate deeply with an American public surrounded by a national political climate of gridlock and frustration.

The story revolved around Annabelle (Meg Sullivan), a young woman who wants to break free from her controlling father Brutus (Lowell Bartholomew). Brutus and Annabelle perform in a self-titled “Country and Western Family Comedy Variety Hour,” and Brutus will not let his daughter leave to see the world until she gets married. The two decide to pit their dachshunds, Sigmunda (Jenny Larson) and Sigfried (Paul Soileau), against each other in a race to determine the rights to the land. Meanwhile, Julie (Cami Alys), a member of a “wymn’s” commune, reluctantly releases her son Jeremy (E. Jason Liebrecht) into the wild, because he has turned 18 and the commune does not allow men. Julie ropes Jeremy to a mountain lion to teach him how to be tough, but eventually he breaks free and meets Annabelle. An unconventional love story ensues.

The characters of Brutus and Julie best embodied the show’s key tension between old and new through their competing visions of the West. Brutus, who wants to build a theme park to recreate the West of yesteryear, reflected tradition and capitalism, while Julie, a lesbian who wants to live free and have her voice heard, suggested an idealized vision of a future that breaks ties with a patriarchal past. Brutus and Julie battled it out in the energetic song “Western Way of Livin’,” but in the end, Annabelle and Jeremy decided to create something entirely new on the fought-over land—a mountain lion preserve. They offered a new vision of life in the West, one that celebrates wildness and creates a liminal (arguably queer) space in-between the paradigms symbolized by their parents. It was this kind of new space (which Annabelle refers to as “the weird part”) where the possibilities for change truly lie. The show’s ending suggested that one must acknowledge the past and respect visions of the future, but ultimately must strive to create possibility and change in the present moment.



Paul Soileau (Sigfried), E. Jason Liebrecht (Jeremy), Jenny Larson (Sigmunda), and ensemble in *I’ve Never Been So Happy*. (Photo: Bret Brookshire.)

The design choices deepened the recurring tension between nostalgia and futurity. Leilah Stewart’s stage design at first seemed minimalist, with just a wooden deck, a wall that appeared to be a blank canvas, and coils of rope. A dusty color palette evoked the desert. The beige, red, and blue costumes—long skirts for women, Western shirts for men, cowboy boots for both—also suggested vintage Americana and the Old West. But the blank wall quickly became a space for video designer Miwa Matreyek to dazzle the audience with stunning visual imagery, including a starry dreamscape, a panoramic desert landscape with cartoon dogs, and animations of a mountain lion bounding through the night sky. Matreyek employed her sophisticated, highly artistic video projection frequently during the musical numbers. This choice allowed the show to constantly shift between an environment that read as nostalgically Western and an ever-changing backdrop of colorful, futuristic imagery, further highlighting the dramatic tensions.

The musical score amplified the show’s balancing act between musical theatre convention and experimentation. Composer Peter Stopschinski’s choice to create stylistically eclectic songs challenged the notion that a musical should have a unified style. The live, string-heavy band played songs ranging from classic country in “Everything’s Tied,” to rhythm and blues in “She Likes Fur,” to dissonant heavy metal in “Don’t Know Sing”—a song narrated by the mountain lion. Kirk Lynn’s lyrics had a quirky, poetic sensibility that at times created a striking and productive disconnect between music and lyrics. For example, the company followed musical theatre convention by ending the show with a powerful all-company ballad, “I’ve Never Been So Happy.” But as the cast stood in a line and began to sing, their voices blended together in operatic harmony and unexpected lyrics emerged. “I’ve never been so happy / To have friends. Let’s find a way to hang out / Forever,” they sang. The juxtaposition of these quotidian lyrics with the swelling emotional music created a moment of humor and surprise. *I’ve Never Been So Happy* ended, then, in exactly the kind of liminal, present-oriented space that the show ultimately and convincingly imagines.

CLAIRE CANAVAN
Texas State University

PROMETHEUS BOUND. Script and lyrics by Steven Sater, from the play by Aeschylus. Music by Serj Tankian. Directed by Diane Paulus. American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, MA. 15 March 2011.

When she arrived at the American Repertory Theater (A.R.T.) in 2009, Diane Paulus brought along her hit New York production of *The Donkey Show*, an effervescent musical adaptation of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* that turned the A.R.T.'s second performance space into Club Oberon every night. Audience members stood in the open space facing the stage, but soon found themselves immersed in the action as the dance floor became the main playing area and pop music blared from countless speakers surrounding the club's periphery. Paulus applied this same concert-like atmosphere and immersive staging to the latest inhabitant of Oberon, a rock musical version of *Prometheus Bound*. With book and lyrics by Steven Sater (the Tony Award-winning lyricist of *Spring Awakening*), music by Serj Tankian (lead singer of the rock band System of a Down), and direction by Paulus, the project seemed to be in the hands of a team ideally suited for adapting Aeschylus's play of mythic defiance to the twenty-first century. Given the pedigree of the creative team and a cast of actors with impressive Broadway credentials, it is unsurprising that the anticipation surrounding a new musical from the people who had rocked the theatre scene with their previous projects—Paulus with the revival of *Hair* and Sater with *Spring Awakening*—was substantial. In addition, the A.R.T.'s partnership with Amnesty International to promote social justice through performances of the show promised an evening of powerful and engaging theatre. The potential evident on paper, however, was never quite matched in performance, and the promotion of Prometheus as a larger metaphor for contemporary human rights issues ultimately took precedence over the quality and consistency of the artistic elements.

In his program note, Sater described the play as "perhaps the most searing indictment of tyranny ever written," and an atmosphere of rebellion clearly bubbled beneath the surface in the opening moments of the production. Lining the stage for the first number, "The Hounds of Law," the cast donned blindfolds and nooses, simulating a kind of self-hanging as they sang of rampant political oppression with an intensity that matched the volume of the onstage rock band. But the defiant tone that began the show quickly transitioned into an angst-ridden meditation on epic suffering. Instead of creating opportunities in his music to further develop Aeschylus's original characters or explore dramaturgical nuances, Sater's limited lyrics offered repetitive



Emmanuel Avellanet (Groupie), Gavin Creel (Prometheus), and Ashley Flanagan, Celina Carvajal, and Jo Lampert (Daughters of the Aether) in *Prometheus Bound*. (Photo: Marcus Stern.)

commentary on an already well-established story. In "Nothing Like a Tyrant's Gratitude," nearly half of the lines in the song were simply a recitation of the title, and this pattern continued through much of the show's score. Sater's penchant for lyrical repetition as a means of enforcing his politically driven interpretation of the play made his message redundant rather than relevant. Likewise, his overly concise script traded meaning and poetry for functionality in an effort to provide a vehicle for the anthem-like musical production numbers.

As with Sater's libretto, the attempts by Paulus and the rest of her creative team to equate mythic martyrdom with present-day social injustices were unevenly executed. For example, when the story turned to the plight of disobedient Prometheus (Gavin Creel), the staging drew direct parallels to infamous acts of war and torture. Over the course of the show, the disgraced titan was electrocuted through a metal headpiece, beaten with a baseball bat, strung up on the balcony railings, and subsequently restrained on his knees with a dog collar around his neck and chains attached to his wrists, imagery that evoked everything from Christ's Crucifixion to the widely circulated photographs of practices at Abu Ghraib. Yet these very specific references to persecution and personal sacrifice seemed in conflict with the self-indulgent punk-rock aesthetic, as the leather-clad performers, techno-inspired lighting, and pounding choral repetition prevented such political commentary from resonating in the dance club atmosphere.

This concert-style configuration was often at odds with Paulus's attempts to maintain theatrical fluidity. Whereas the staging of *The Donkey Show* was rather flexible and often based on interaction with



Michael Cunio (Oceanos) and Gavin Creel (Prometheus) in *Prometheus Bound*. (Photo: Marcus Stern.)

the audience, the more traditional musical numbers in *Prometheus Bound* had to happen around, and often in spite of, the spectators gathered in the staging area. During “Those Who Are Wise,” the three Daughters of the Aether were each poised on the shoulders of a “Groupie,” who had to maneuver his way through the crowds around Prometheus—a difficult task to achieve smoothly and seamlessly through an audience packed so tightly together.

While these limiting parameters of both text and concept did not allow for much individuality in performance, as the titular prisoner, Creel was every inch a rock-and-roll titan. Contorting his body and stretching his voice to the limit, he was able to transcend the physical and narrative constraints of his character’s position and deliver an electric A.R.T. debut. The Tony-nominated Lea Delaria was at her scenery-chewing best in the role of Force, and Uzo Aduba’s portrayal of the wandering Io provided the show’s only real tender moment with her song “The Hunger.” Although they were generally without musical or design elements to distinguish their characters, the leading actors never wavered in their zealous delivery of each number. When performing

as an ensemble, the group was truly united in vocal ability and emotional intensity, but even their collective talents were unable to provide enough variation within Sater and Tankian’s score.

At the show’s conclusion, the cast asked the audience to help them “shine a light on those standing alone against injustice” and to support the A.R.T.’s collaboration with Amnesty International. Together, the two organizations dedicated each performance of *Prometheus Bound* to eight activists who have been imprisoned for their resistance to tyranny, an admirable project that demonstrates the continuing potential of art as a powerful tool for social change. In an effort to do justice to this noble intention, however, the creators of *Prometheus Bound* focused too narrowly on the message, instead of crafting a cohesive and powerful messenger. Although this was Paulus’s fourth directorial effort since her high-profile appointment as the theatre’s artistic director, many are still waiting to see how she intends to fulfill her goal of revitalizing the A.R.T.’s significance at both the local and national levels.

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