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Sarah Bay-Cheng

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GLOBAL SCREEN SHOTS

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Untitled Feminist Show, by Young Jean Lee, performed by Young Jean Lee's Theater Company; *Major Tom*, by Victoria Melody; *Conte d'amour*, by Markus Öhrn, Institutet, and Nya Rampen. Harbourfront Centre 2014 World Stage Festival, Toronto.

The Harbourfront Centre World Stage opened its season with the #artlive Vogue Ball, playing the hashtag of social media, itself a form of mediated performance, against the “realness” of the New York drag world. This programming decision broadcasted questions of authenticity, identity, and representation that would emerge as the most salient links among this year's otherwise distinct offerings, alongside a corresponding interest in the consequences of performance's ongoing appropriation of media. In addition to a host of international performances, World Stage has also dedicated resources to cultivating original work. These concerns were apparent across a range of works, from Kyle Abraham's dance *The Radio Show* to a newly commissioned audio play from Fixt Point, titled *The Tale of Harbourfront Centre*, as well as in the festival's embrace of a broad-based media platform. The festival's strength, however, came from those offerings that were more difficult to absorb, bring-

ing questions of contemporary culture, media, and politics to the forefront.

The presence of digital technologies was certainly a key component of this focus, but even among performances lacking the overt presence of screens, computers, and other digital markers, it was clear that media technologies have refocused our cultural attention on questions of authenticity and representation, issues that for all their connection to new media remain fundamentally theatrical problems. Among the most compelling performances in this year's series were the Canadian premiere of Young Jean Lee's *Untitled Feminist Show*, *Major Tom* by UK-based performance artist Victoria Melody, and Markus Öhrn's problematic *Conte d'amour* (“Love Story”), which inspired numerous walk-outs and a vitriolic response from the Toronto press. Gathering prominent work from major international festivals, artistic director Tina Rasmussen's World Stage series provided the opportunity to reflect

upon emerging trends from the past few years and revealed just how pervasive and powerful media technologies have become onstage.

How else does one explain the video projections in Young Jean Lee's *Untitled Feminist Show*? Lee's wordless and costume-less play has received many reviews since its premiere in January 2012, and yet most reviews routinely overlook its use of video projections, except for the occasional brief mention. The images often seem insignificant, more akin to large screen-savers than video art. They hover above the show mostly as visual abstractions, anomalies within a dramaturgy built on physical and gestural specificity. Yet, the staging in the Fleck Dance Theatre—a white rectangular floor echoed in a hanging white rectangle overhead—resembled nothing so much as two screens. The blankness of these dual surfaces, like the naked bodies of the performers, created a performance environment as empty canvas, a *tabula rasa* for our collective cultural images and projections.

Working against the backdrop of these seemingly empty fields, Lee's staging thus relies on familiarity and recognition for meaning. Without language or costumes, and using relatively few props, the performers construct narratives (nearly every vignette has some kind of story) from a legible gestural vocabulary. The opening scene of children seduced by an evil witch in the forest, a slow-motion fight scene, and a dance of common domestic labor—cleaning, cooking, child-care—rely on our mutual understanding of physical gestures. Perhaps the most memorable example of this legibility is a series of mimed sex acts directed to specific audience members.

Performed with wicked charm by the cabaret performer Lady Rizo, the piece requires nothing other than familiarity with the male anatomy and a willingness to strain credulity. The music for the show is also drawn from familiar sources, such as the ubiquitous "Wild Thing" and excerpts from The Magnetic Fields and Mozart. The movement throughout is so familiar that the few non-narrative dances fit awkwardly within the hour-long performance. More successful were the more quotidian movements made strange only by the total absence of clothing, which rendered the unadorned female body as simultaneously the most familiar and unrecognizable presence onstage.

As an "untitled" and "feminist" show, Lee leaves open various interpretations for both the aesthetic and political contexts. However, the video animations might serve to remind us that every supposedly blank surface has a history and that even abstractions can make an impact. The closing video sequence culminates in a pulsing strobe effect that becomes visceral, engaging not only the imaginations of the audience, but also our bodies. (Note, for instance, the requirement that strobe effects come with warnings to those they might cause physical harm.) Like the shared cultural understanding that structures the piece and our responses, the videos discipline our final physical response, compelling a particular kind of vision that is both highly artificial (digital as opposed to the organic, fleshy bodies) and simultaneously more visceral than the imagined narratives that have transpired. These video images offer a different way of reading the female bodies onstage, not as organic but as constructed objects manipulated within a (symbolic) white



Untitled Feminist Show by Young Jean Lee. Photo: Julieta Cervantes.

field. The whole effect reminded me of so many “untitled” minimalist works that code their gendered politics more obliquely. Reading the bodies of Lee’s performers in such an environment, we might think we have located authentic, embodied expression, but the familiar tropes of race and gender within an artificial aesthetic construct suggest otherwise. There is nothing, finally, that is natural about a body onstage.

Like the nude body, animals seem to assume a level of authenticity within the artificial environments of the theatre, and nearly every aspect of Vicky Melody’s *Major Tom* is calculated to build on a lack of conceit both in its human and canine performers. The show begins in the entrance to the theatre, where performance artist Melody greets the audience members with cheerful conversation, programs, and her large basset hound, Major Tom. Major Tom is an exceptionally friendly usher at first, readily accepting the petting and affections of dozens of strangers until, eventually overwhelmed, he lays across the doorway such that the rest entering must carefully step over his large, relaxed body. From the very start, he’s an amiable if not highly disciplined performer, or as Melody calls him, “walking Prozac.”

From this greeting, Melody and her dog move into the main playing space of the EnWave Theatre, where a mostly empty stage includes a small table with a plant, a white partition for the requisite costume changes, and a large dog bed. Upstage on the floor, “MAJOR TOM” is outlined in stage lights and above the stage hangs a screen. Melody initially guides Major Tom to the bed, only to have him wander off as soon as she directs her attention elsewhere.

It’s schtick right out of the nineteenth century and still just as effective: Melody describes Major Tom as “stubborn” and he picks his head up and looks at her, inciting audience laughter. Our pleasure in these moments comes precisely from the knowledge that Major Tom is not a highly trained theatrical animal, but appears to be always and only ever *himself* as he wanders the space, on stage and off, sometimes sleeping, but usually laying in various poses and gazing at Melody. At one point his antics undercut the comedy, causing Melody to complain that “he ruined the story.” Melody, too, offers the appearance of a spontaneous charm as she takes us through her story of first entering Major Tom in dog shows and then, out of sympathy with her often harshly judged pet, entering her own beauty quest to become Mrs. Galaxy.

Throughout the performance, Melody’s often breathless style of presentation creates the impression of an improvised narrative. Her adventures as an initially inept dog handler and then a barely more competent beauty queen unfold as stories told many times, but perhaps never the same way twice. This effect is strengthened by Tom’s seemingly random movements around the stage space, as he amiably waddles from spot to spot, irrespective of Melody’s movements. Yet, as the performance unfolds, subtle repetitions emphasize the highly constructed nature of her disciplined performance. Every time Melody engages a new advisor, for example, she concludes, “I said yes to becoming his project,” and by the end we can discern readily—perhaps too much so—the parallels between the constructed ideals imposed both on competitive purebreds and women. Although the performance never overtly plays on the associations between femi-

ninity and dogs (e.g., “bitch”), Melody subjects herself to the same scrutiny as Tom, inviting us to evaluate them both in profile and to judge her according to the same language applied to competitive dogs. The performance culminates in a two-channel video overhead that juxtaposes Melody and Tom’s final respective preparations and competitions in which, fittingly, neither of them wins.

Like the David Bowie songs that underscore the show (from “Changes” to, of course, “Space Oddity”), Melody’s performance builds and subverts expectations all along the way. In her efforts to win a weight-loss competition, for example, she first gains weight over Christmas. She confesses “I was the best guest” in her willingness to eat, drink, and be merry, but it takes her almost until the final competition to return to her original weight. She also pokes gentle fun at herself for her ignorance of bikini waxing and the women who run the pageants. For the latter, Melody draws on video documentation both to mock the horrified looks of the Mrs. Galaxy organizers who view Melody’s post-Christmas body with disbelief, and as evidence of vindication when we watch her collect the alternate prizes at the Mrs. UK competition, where Melody is recognized for her personality and publicity appearances, among other awards. The low-resolution videos reinforce the “realness” of the performance and remind us that gender is a performance nearly always directed to an audience.

Further playing on audience expectations and proximity was video artist Markus Öhrn’s *Conte d’amour*, a challenging, intermission-less, three-hour, live video installation that first scandalized audiences at the 2012 Avignon

Festival. The production is inspired by the 2008 revelations of Josef Fritzl, an Austrian man who kept his daughter and some of their biological children locked in the cellar of his home for twenty-four years. (Other children from the incest lived with Fritzl upstairs in the house.) Staged as a collaboration among Öhrn, the Swedish touring group Institutet, and the Finnish company Nya Rampen, *Conte d’amour* explores clichés of the family and patriarchal power through 1980s pop songs, bizarre rants, and racist tropes, all within a visual system of media appropriations that is both chillingly familiar and totally offensive.

Öhrn show begins with the Fritzl father-figure (played by Jacob Ohrman) sitting in a bathrobe and mid-calf, black socks on an elevated set overlooking artificial turf. The house and its “lawn” are enclosed in an appropriately clichéd white picket fence. He sits on a couch with some life-sized dolls, alternately smashing potato chips into their faces, pouring soda over their mouths, and grinding his pelvis into them. Standing in for the children who lived in Fritzl’s house, the dolls seem calculated to provoke the *Unheimlichkeit* common to so many stories of domestic abuse and exploitation. There was a sense of exhaustion to the actions, as if the father himself had grown bored with their repetition.

Indeed, the visual vocabulary for Öhrn’s work is comprised largely of mass-produced objects from modern life in an industrialized society: McDonald’s burgers and fries, rubber masks, small ceramic figurines of idealized childhood. The performers’ gestures and voices are similarly appropriated from familiar systems of cultural signs. The



Above: *Major Tom* by Victoria Melody. Photo: Liquid Photo. Below: *Conte d'amour* by Markus Öhrn, Institutet, and Nya Rampen. Photo: Robin Junicke. Courtesy Harbourfront Centre World Stage Festival.



daughter-mother (played in deliberately unconvincing drag by Elmer Bäck) sings her horrors in renditions of Joy Division's "Love Will Tear Us Apart" and Lionel Richie's "Hello," while the "baby" of the family (writer Anders Carlssen) asks in a falsetto voice to play "Thai girl with Daddy." Over the course of the show, the father's abusive power is conveyed increasingly in grunts and goose-steps, while he plays a malicious form of Doctors without Borders and casts the older boy (6'4" Rasmus Slati) as "the African," covering Slati's head in a black rubber mask and tormenting him as entertainment for the other children. (These images brought to mind Vinge and Müller's Ibsen adaptations, another Scandinavian-German collaboration.) Predictably, masculinity is coded as African, silent and degraded, while femininity is coded as Asian, accompanied by the insulting "ching-chong" rendition of Asian languages and references to "Thai massage." Such familiar stereotypes have long since played out on the world's stages, and in this context offered no additional insights into the nature of cruelty. Perhaps it's getting tougher to find metaphors for evil these days.

More interesting is Öhrn's staging, more a video installation than theatre. All of the actions take place in front of the audience, but are simultaneously obscured. The lower portion of the stage—ostensibly the basement where the daughter and some of her children live—is encased in opaque plastic wrap. The performance's visual component is mediated through video cameras that the characters both manipulate and appeal to, as in a moment when the daughter yells into the camera, "I am a victim!" One way to interpret Öhrn's

staging is as a critique of the society that would allow such horrors to occur, perhaps obliquely aware but reluctant to "see" what was really happening. This was certainly the perspective of Austrian novelist and playwright, Elfriede Jelinek, whose essay "Im Verlassenen" ("The Abandoned") suggests a source for much of Öhrn's concept. Her website prohibits quotation, but the first sentence of the essay argues for Austria as a rehearsal stage for the world's larger horror, a reference that Jelinek leaves perhaps deliberately vague, but surely includes the Holocaust among other global atrocities.¹ Many of her references to the Fritzl crime resonate with Öhrn's imagery: For example, Jelinek refers to women as blow-up dolls and the female body as a site constructed for exploration by the lustful father. Öhrn's father figure descends from his manipulations with the life-size dolls to the darkened basement lit with only a headlamp, as if he were spelunking. Later, he lowers himself down on a rock-climbing rope and harness. On both descents, his actions play out in near total darkness.

Another, perhaps complementary, interpretation might read this "love story" as a response to the pervasive horrors of today's media culture, in which convenience, capitalism, and racist representations oppress healthy family relations, contorting our view of decency through a lens distorted by too many pop songs and too much junk food. Here the responsibility shifts from a society willfully blind to itself to one distracted by its desires. Both suggest that the abuse experienced in the Fritzl house carries some message about society. The senseless cruelty of exploitation, disproportionately directed toward women and children demands

meaning, as if an interpretative strategy could compensate for the recognition of horrors that can no longer be ignored. Öhrn's staging frustrates in offering no such strategy for understanding. The performance ends as the four men emerge from behind the plastic barrier and confront the audience. Slati plays electric guitar, Ohrman trains the video camera on the other men now in full view, while Bäck and Carlsson croon Chris Isaak's "Wicked Game" (sample lyric: "What a wicked game to play, to make me feel this way"). It's an ironic

ending to an ironic love story and deeply unsatisfying. Which is, of course, the point. Personally, I prefer Jelinek's form of response, which contextualizes horror without needing to replicate it explicitly. Sometimes the artificial response is the most authentic of all.

NOTES

1. Elfriede Jelinek, "Elfriede Jelinek Homepage Wien," accessed 15 May 2014, <http://www.elfriedejelinek.com/>. The full essay is available in her archives for 2008.

SARAH BAY-CHENG is professor of theatre and director of the MA and PhD in theatre and performance program at the University at Buffalo, SUNY. She also serves as the founding director of the Technē Institute for Arts and Emerging Technologies.