

Theatre After the Fall

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As the smoke poured over my Brooklyn neighborhood on September 11th, the last thing I could think of was the theatre. I quickly got my daughter out of school and closed all our windows. The next few days were ones of shock and chaos as we went from vigil to vigil trying to make sense of the event (among the losses, our neighborhood lost twelve firefighters from the local station, the husband of the P.T.A. president at my daughter's school, the husband of a local shopkeeper, and the grandmother of my daughter's friend and classmate.) No, the theatre wasn't on my mind.

The first weeks had performance elements in them—I witnessed the performance of grief at Union Square, happened upon a late night Sikh vigil in Central Park, and wandered along the Brooklyn Promenade, where flowers and notes began marking the loss of both life and of the once spectacular view of the NY skyline—but going to the theatre was the last thing I wanted to do. Instead I found myself perpetually frustrated by my lack of useful skills to aid in the rescue effort. Instead of following Guiliani's call to "return to normal—go to the theatre!" I was drawn to the theatre happening downtown. I volunteered for the Red Cross and did many jobs: filing, alphabetizing, dismantling temporary shelters, and making up beds at Ground Zero for exhausted workers to rest in—each bed decorated with notes by children across the country: a donated teddy bear, and a piece of chocolate. It was only because of pre-arranged group tickets to *Hedda Gabler* on Broadway a week and a half after the collapse that I ventured back into the theatre. Through the course of the next few weeks, I realized that a pattern was emerging. My theatre-going was in a sense paralleling the reactions of grief and shock around me in the city.

I have to admit that the prospect of watching *Hedda*—played as a frustrated, bourgeois woman—kill herself was not appealing to me, and unfortunately, the rest of the production only served to reinforce my trepidation. Escapism simply wasn't possible yet, and this production certainly wouldn't have satisfied if that was what I was after. I grew agitated sitting in the theatre and sought meanings in the text that weren't there. An attempt to make the production more contemporary by juxtaposing a relaxed, laid back acting style with period style costumes and sets made the experience disjointed and removed—I could not relate to it at all. Luckily, the next day was a more integrated experience at Yubiwa Hotel's *Long Distance Love*, an internet based piece that took place in the out-of-the-way warehouse space of RedLAB in what is called DUMBO (Down Under the Manhattan Bridge

Overpass), Brooklyn. There, I was welcomed to the theatre with complimentary wine and cheese and proceeded to sit in a long, narrow room with a shallow stage in front and a large screen house left. This global performance took place simultaneously in Brooklyn and at club asia P in Tokyo (we went to a matinee, due to time differences the only other show was at midnight). “Yubiwa Hotel plays with the state-of-the-art, *fin-de-siècle* communication tools as if they were play phones made with two paper cups connected with tightly drawn strings.” (Program Notes) While ultimately I was not impressed with the use of the internet as a creative device within the piece, I was intrigued by its premise. In four segments, each comprised of two actors, one in NY, one in Tokyo, different types of children’s play were acted out by the coupled actors, utilizing the internet to foreground a global connection/perspective to performance in this hi-tech age. However, the connection was more akin to paper cup play than the sophisticated technology I expected; the screen images were too grainy and there was at least a five-second time delay, both problems that might have been made more interesting in a truncated version of the drawn out segments. After the empty experience on Broadway the evening before however, this gritty piece contained many provocative themes. Based upon her childhood, director Shiritama Hitsujija developed four types of play, from long-distance teasing, “I’d beat you up if you weren’t in Japan,” to imaginary object play where each actor’s prop, one a large candy cane, the other a mirror, became different objects to manipulate—a horse, a baton, a machine gun—eventually turning into a twisted aggressive striptease with blood streaming from the U.S. actor’s mouth. What struck me was a cycle of aggression that swung back to friendship in much of the piece, the breaking of innocence as seen through children. Or perhaps I was just acutely in-tune with the ideas of a child’s turn from a purely innocent understanding of the world to one that incorporates tremendous aggression.

Afterwards, a question and answer session was encouraged and it was there that I realized the larger implications of this technology’s global usage. The audiences in Japan clamored to know how the audiences here were coping with the tragedy and wondered if we could find any resonance in the piece we had just seen. The answers represented the mixture of still fresh emotions in the crowd. One young man stood up and spoke of the loss of a good friend of the family and said this “escapism” was exactly what he needed. His tears, and perhaps too much of the wine, prompted him to leave and go to the restroom in time to miss the perplexed response from the Tokyo audience, who evidently felt more like I did about the piece’s connections. There was a sense of relief from Tokyo to have heard stories from New York and to have shared this time as a community. For New Yorkers, at a time when many of us still had interrupted phone service and only one channel on television the technology in this small room allowed us to feel we were embraced. I left feeling more grounded than when I arrived.

During the next two performances I attended, the thought struck me that I would not be able to read performance through anything but the September 11th event for a long time. The Kaitaisha Theater Company's *Bye Bye: The New Primitive* was recommended by a few people who had attended their workshop earlier that week. I knew their physical work was highly praised and I wanted to see how this translated into performance. The piece was haunting, but more brutal than I was ready for. Director Shinjin Shimizu writes in his program notes,

We must differentiate between force, violence by the system, and the violence which is inherent in life . . . I fear any violence that inhibits mutual understanding. I created this work to oppose the 'Theatre of Life' and the society that endorses it. I aim to destroy the violence living in the body and to wipe out its brutality. This piece is a theatre of the 'body' and is filled with the 'desire for destruction.' In that way, it is a 'Theatre of Death.'

According to the program, this project seeks to outline the "history of the human body in the 20th century." Merging conceptions of bodies in war: from bodies as war-machines to the "virtual bodies of the Gulf War," Shimizu forges transitions from bodies in/as cities to bodies of what he calls "the Emperor System" in Japan, mixed in with the idea of the cyborg and cloned body. A large project to be sure.

Still steeped in the violence of the WTC, my reaction to Shimizu's actors was to at first shut down and dismiss the piece as a brutal and chaotic bad dream. I felt confused by the images I saw: a shaking, emaciated woman in a pool of light, looking simultaneously tortured from the outside and starved to death from the inside; a white male actor systematically slapping the back of a bare-chested Japanese female who was covered in green make-up—slaps so hard it made my body cringe each time I heard the hand strike; another male actor crouching down, slapping his own thigh until its redness made me want to intervene. These are only a few of the images that have continued to haunt me and confuse me. The final program notes by Tadashi Uchino prove their own point, "We feel disturbed, displaced, and disrupted, in both our emotions and our minds." Indeed.

Weeks later, the political climate began to turn from anger and helplessness, sorrow and confusion, to one of discussion, at least in my small part of NY life. Issues and explanations were sought and discussions with people on the subway, on the street, strangers and those I hardly knew turned to the world at large, to thinking. My theatre-going inadvertently reflected this shift. My passion for technological theatre drew me to the Kitchen to see a "multimedia" piece called *Logic of the Birds*, which is described in the program by RoseLee Goldberg as "loosely based on twelfth century Persian poet Attar's *Conference of the Birds*, a

literary work . . . a pivotal text in Iranian culture for almost eight hundred years.” This adaptation, a work-in-progress collaboration between writer/filmmaker Shoja Azari, visual artist/filmmaker Shirin Neshat, performance artist/composer/vocalist Sussan Deyhim, and filmmaker/writer/cinematographer Ghasem Ebrahimi, is the beginning of a longer tour of this piece and it tells the tale of a nation’s search for a king, originally a nation of birds, who decide to seek the king Simorgh, who, as Goldberg describes it, is a “figure whom Attar borrowed from an ancient Persian goddess myth and from whose eggs, it was believed, the world was created.” Public support after the WTC collapse for this Iranian piece was overwhelming. Now one week into the official “war,” our communities resting on delicate global balances, this theatre became a stage for building greater support systems and alliances. I overheard another audience member in the packed entry way before the doors open say, “No bag check? At Lincoln Center all our bags were checked!” People outside were looking for extra tickets and our friends were on a fifty-person waiting list and never made it in. The room was packed to capacity.

The birds of this *Logic* are now humans and the piece has two tracts, one a film that runs on three connecting angled screens situated just above the heads of the live performers who often appear after the film sequence to enact it on stage. Unfortunately, the juxtaposition served to alienate the live actors from the film, which I do not think was the intention. The bleakness of the set-less stage was often overshadowed by the richness of the film above it. However, the lead actor, Sussan Deyhim, who plays the woman in search of Simorah, was a compelling presence and had a voice that captivated—the live portion felt like being at a concert. Early in the film Deyhim glides seamlessly into a large body of water, followed by scores of black-robed “birds,” thus beginning her journey. As the piece evolved, the journey takes the cast over bleak, seemingly war-torn landscapes and finally she emerges in a red gown over a great craggy hill, followers close behind. The quest for Simorgh is a quest to become one and through the journey Deyhim depends on her song to communicate with her followers. Supposedly it is through glossolalia, speaking in tongues, that she persuades the others to follow her and this scene is one of the most striking as the live actors all line up and slowly move forward, loudly speaking in tongues to the audience, perhaps in an attempt to persuade us towards enlightenment, regardless of our language, nationality, or beliefs. A quote from Attar’s is provided in the program and I was left with his thought, “Though you have struggled, wandered, traveled far/It is yourselves you see and what you are.” The return to a sense of daily routine was beginning.

Finally, I attended a production of *The Bacchae* that once more paralleled transitions through the trauma and what dawned upon me was unsettling as it brought me full circle. The production of *The Bacchae: Torn to Pieces*, subtitled (an excavation of texts) was playing at LaMama and was performed by a company called Hopeful Monsters. This company’s strategy is to “hang” non-theatrical

sources onto “the spine” of a classic text, “highlighting the associations between the spine and the more porous skin.” It has been too long since I’ve read *The Bacchae*. There have been too many events that can be read through it. This version however, reminiscent of the Wooster Group’s microphone interrogation scenes, is one of the clearest and most introspective re-tellings of *Bacchae* I have seen. Set as though an investigation, three actors sit upstage and respond to an interrogator, re-telling and often enacting this classic tale. Drawing from texts as diverse as: Henry Miller’s *Tropic of Cancer*, Rilke’s *Duino Elegies*, Wouk’s *The Caine Mutiny Court Martial*, Quotes from *The New York Times*’s “Notes Found After the Hijackings, 9/11/01,” *Into Thin Air*, by Jon Krakauer, *The Manson Trial Transcripts*, and others, this story of revenge and cultural misunderstandings reminded me that there has always been an artistic response to crisis. That the Greeks have given us more than enough texts that reflect and teach the past, and project into the future, brilliantly told warnings or perhaps merely reiterations of aggression and war, of “othering” and racial prejudice, of intolerance. I left the theatre with the joy of having seen something powerful; and well-executed, my theatre-going experience was rejuvenated, while at the same time, haunted by its implicit message that war has been the answer, and as I got on the subway amidst warnings of future attacks, that war is still in place. Through theatre and by its implications, discussion, however, perhaps there are other alternatives.



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