

OTHER POSSIBLE WORLDS ONSTAGE

Kéline Gotman

Besides, You Lose Your Soul or The History of Western Civilization, directed and written by Julia Lee Barclay, performed and created by Bill Aitchison, Zoe Bouras, Rachel Ellis, and Birthe Jorgenson. Camden People's Theatre, London, February 11–March 1, 2009.

*B*esides, *You Lose Your Soul or the History of Western Civilization* presents itself as a forensic investigation into the place of the soul in theatre, philosophy, civilization, and the West. It is inspired by the work of Foreman, Cage, Burroughs, and Gysin, while integrating director and writer Julia Lee Barclay's personal diaries and notes, as well as narratives, gestures, and language rules created by the co-creators in their Apocryphal Theatre lab work. Cut-outs from the canon of western philosophy (Descartes, Hegel, Rousseau, Nietzsche, Beauvoir) undermine the notion that language is a natural function, and that theatre is a repeatable thing, foregrounding instead the improvisatory and aleatory quality of performance. This yields uncannily meaningful nonsense phrases, wild and at times deliberately far-fetched combinations juxtaposing high and low art, anecdote and metaphysics, in eye- and ear-“popping” nuggets of lucid speculation about the nature of language, the universe, and the self.

The stage space that audience members walk into is strewn with books—hundreds that were all, or almost all, written prior to 1945, the point at which Barclay claims irony became unthinkable. The books make up the near-totality of the stage set. The only other items of furniture include a long, boardroom-like table propped up on stacks of books, alternately used to suggest a war-room and a podium; two large platforms; handwritten scrawls in chalk on the four walls outlining each performer's “score”; and a few bits of costume hanging on pegs. The actors are clad in an array of suits loosely suggesting both philosopher and detective. Chairs placed *ad hoc* around the space offer audience members the opportunity to view the show from multiple perspectives—and, indeed, to change perspectives during the show by getting up and moving around. The invitation to disrupt—and be part of the show—is suggested explicitly by Barclay, who makes an announcement at the start inviting audience members to

move around and to look at the books. All of these, one notices, have something to do with history, philosophy, law, or theatre. They also tend to deal with language, war, imperialism and, indirectly, obsolescence—themes that recur throughout the performance, as the improvised labor of deconstruction takes us beyond the set play into a world of live invention: gestures and cut-ups of the texts surrounding the themes of truth, history, detective-work, lies, and civilization offer the audience a mixture of scripted and unscripted moments that tell a story about how stories are told.

The projection of the script itself onto one side of the space turns it into yet another “document of civilization,” along with the books and other piece of paper strewn about the stage and pasted on the walls, while Barclay, in a black dress, Kantor-like at her station in a corner of the space (appropriately surrounded by books) with her laptop, performs the part of the playwright/director, while actively participating in the real-time work of rewriting the script with “Track Changes.” As actors misspeak lines or invent their own, she integrates these as well as audience comments into the projected play text. In this way, she foregrounds the script—and textuality—by underscoring the choices made by each, and their autonomous responses to her playwright-author’s “sacred” written word. This highlights the text’s changeability while enabling performers (and audience) to play with her language, and claim, Pirandello-like, their authority. Audience interaction took various forms: when I shouted out to one of the performers that she was “doing a good job,” after she claimed to be out of her waters with all this heady

philosophy, my intervention appeared on the wall in “Track Changes.” Similarly, when I started to sing the *Marseillaise* as another performer held up a book of French revolutionary history, this was taken up by some of the performers, and a new stage direction was integrated into the script. Other audience members crossed the stage to change seats, or uttered alternately snarky, giggly, and utterly serious retorts to the actors, offering the performance a dynamic, disrupted, and wonderfully chaotic quality, conjuring infinite possibility, and the surrendering of control over play and text. The invitation to audiences to perform, effectively co-creating the script every night, was suggested, as Barclay insisted as an invitation, rather than an injunction, to join in: the projection of the text suggested its public quality, as it desacralized the actor’s knowledge, and the illusion of spontaneous delivery. The script was treated instead like a found and a malleable object that anyone could pick up and play with (although Barclay, as author, fittingly, and self-consciously, controlled the keyboard).

Performers handed books to the audience, inviting them to read sections aloud, and cut them up, or talked to them about a range of *ad lib* or otherwise rehearsed things, from the sizes and shapes of their dresses (and bodies) to the emplacement of city-names on a map. If audience members seemed alternately baffled and tempted by this invitation to jump in and talk back, or inhibited as well as tantalized by the thought of transgressing the all-powerful fourth wall (in spite of decades of experimental theatre painstakingly trying to break it down), some did engage, if perhaps less than Barclay had hoped. I had the



Left: Theron Schmidt. Bottom:
Audience members finding text to cut
into *Besides . . .* and Julia Lee Barclay
at her laptop. Photos: Birthe Jorgensen.
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Theatre.



privilege of being familiar with her work, as well as having attended a few rehearsals, and spoken with her at length about the show's open structure, although I'm not sure I would have felt so comfortable jumping in otherwise. As she notes, the show did, ultimately, feel more like "straight" theatre than her work often does, perhaps partially because it was lit in semi-darkness, like "real" theatre, and scripted, in its way, as well as graced with something of a beginning, a middle, and an end. The culmination of the performance was a deconstructed, Jarry-like *Hamlet*, offered to audience members as a strange parting gesture. It seemed to suggest that they—those unfamiliar with her work and disconcerted by its nonlinear and apparently haphazard quality—more or less got what they had come for: "real theatre." But, the cheeky confinement of this condensed and quite silly *Hamlet* to the last ten minutes of the production undid any sense that a contract had been met, the metatheatrical quality of the show instead taking its final bow. Perhaps the coded aspect of the performers' work—with elaborate rules clearly structuring their trajectories, cut-ups, and improvisations, contributed to audience members' relative shyness: if it was not always visible, there was clearly some system guiding the choices being made. It was all so choreographed, through the chaos (the scores pasted to the walls helped suggest that there was a definite structure being followed).

It is the ensemble quality of the Apocryphal Theatre's work that enables them to play like this, and to trust one another with these open structures. The play text—or score, as Barclay prefers to describe it—modified, or layered, and ghosted by the changes that occurred every night, testified to this fluidity:

a revolving cast of half a dozen lab members—those having worked on this production and available to perform on a given night (this included Fred Backus, who flew in exceptionally from New York to participate)—idiosyncratically and collectively reworked the script. This anti-hierarchical ethos is at the core of Barclay and the Apocryphal Theatre's work: performers can come and go, as can audience members. The choice to stay, to listen, and to understand something in this apparent chaos is everyone's own. (I have not seen anyone walk out of a show yet, although Barclay claims that they do.)

At the outset, *Besides, You Lose Your Soul or the History of Western Civilization* was triggered by a comment a U.S. officer made in regard to torture, in which he claimed that it rarely yields any real results, and, "besides, you lose your soul." The script Barclay wrote from that comment—and a bemused contemplation of her Western Civilization course books from her undergraduate days—is complemented by snippets of a CD of homespun Kurdish music given to her by a friendly restaurant owner, and played Dogma-like from a CD player onstage. The CD player itself is manned by the performers live as well as by production manager Lucy Avery, who pads around in her white detective gloves picking up bits of debris (scattered books, and other "evidence" employed by the actors in their search for truth, and which carefully need to be bagged). The show thematically goes beyond these war narratives to critique notions of logic, oppression, truth-making, and the course of history and its writing. Included in this critique is a deconstruction of claims put forward in the last decade, such as the presence of Weapons

of Mass Destruction in Iraq. Although these critiques rarely make their way explicitly to the surface of the production, the implicit work of deconstructing words and phrases from history and philosophy addresses questions about the ownership of truth, bodies, structures, and narratives head-on.

Reason and logic are deconstructed in the show as strings of words produced by chance operations and the performer's live "remixing" of phrases undermine philosophical truisms and historical orthodoxies. An improvisatory cut-up juxtaposing Descartes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Aristotle, for instance, yields bizarre phrases like "paroxysms of Nietzsche," "paroxysms of God," "God onstage," "bad experiences onstage," "I tame Nietzsche on stage," "bad experiences of God," "bad God," "God has bad experiences with Nietzsche," "the truth and falsity of metaphysical assertions in nature," and "the truth and falsity of metaphysical assertions onstage." While some of these may appear silly, others "click," offering audience members surprising moments of heightened awareness that suggest new meaning is possible, or at least that we can find some distance from the old. Language structures and thought patterns are set center stage in this show, as performers find new and always more outrageous combinations in a virtuosic game of live magnet poetry. While Cagean in its influences, this playful, intuitive, live disintegration of semantic structures enables us to imagine other possible worlds, in what Jacques Rancière calls a renewed relation to the past that is characteristic of the "aesthetic regime of the arts."¹

The pronouns "she" and "She" are employed throughout (although the capitalization is invisible to audience members except via the script projected on the wall, this distinction is key for Barclay, and is subtly manifest in the performers' delivery). These pronouns alternately refer to the author herself, to individual performers, to past reviewers, to a god-figure, and to a sort of alter ego, among others, undoing the notion of individuality or voice. This ambiguity undermines the notion that these pronouns refer to the author only (an interpretation, she notes, she is subject to often, as critics and audience alike typically assume that "she" or "She"—often present in her texts—refers to an individual, generally the author herself, whereas male pronouns are readily identified as abstract entities, i.e., universal). The show argues, implicitly, that this sort of universality is a myth, and a strangely gendered one. Moreover, language is ghosted by such phrases and truisms from the past; the only way to disentangle ourselves from it is to cut them up and redeploy them in ambiguous and often ambivalent contexts. Although we may not find stable "other" identities underlying existing ones, we may at least imagine speech and gestures uninhabited by some of these ghosts. For Barclay, this language/meaning game is parallel to the body/soul problem: what the soul is to the body in the history of Western thought, so the existence of an ineffable underlying truth is to the thought patterns that express it. To find these, searching detective-like through stacks of old books with detective gloves and plastic body bags, sniffing around, is not so much the goal of the show as to gesture towards the absurdity of this

search, or any search for truth, authority and certainty. Barclay's work is heavily indebted to poststructuralist philosophy, as it is to the history of experimental theatre. In this regard, it is heady, if not without its moments of utter hilarity—a Foremanesque, desperate, sober hilarity deftly masking as insouciance.

The search for the soul is, here, a search for the relationship between sacred and secular, law and exegesis, interpretation and invention, stability and change. In this regard, the play is about creation, individuality, collectivity, authorship, freedom, rules, danger, and risk, as well as vulnerability. When the improvisation “flies,” like a good jazz riff (a metaphor Barclay uses often), the result highlights the live quality of the best theatre. But, the risk involved is one Barclay acknowledges, as improvisation can fall flat, and often does. Yet, she embraces this fully, although her theatre has notoriously exasperated reviewers and show-goers looking for an utterly rehearsed night out. One reviewer, attending on one of the nights I saw it, accused the show of being a travesty of theatre. In a sense, it is; but, for Barclay, this “travesty” is performed self-consciously to reclaim the danger involved in live performance. The gestural and verbal cut-ups that Barclay uses to structure this liveness are techniques she has been experimenting with in labs over the past decade, first in New York and now in London, under the auspices of the Present Company and now the Apocryphal Theatre. The result is a playful, if at times almost self-consciously silly, tapestry of language and thought empty of consistent narrative or character. By shifting between personae and what Barclay calls “levels of presence” (“on-stage,” “off-stage,”

“warm-up,” “personal,” “sacred,” and “secular”) and “relationships to others and to the whole” (“support,” “witness,” “disrupt,” and “ignore”), the play text emerges as a world with its own logic, exploring moods and modes of interacting. These levels of presence and these relationships are offered subtly, at times imperceptibly, to shift the tenor and tone of the words uttered. The words—and their manipulation—become the site of the story, as the language—the script—is treated like a found object, underscored by the actors' occasional over-enunciation, and by the mismatch between the words and the speech, action and text, and mood or intention and the content of the prose.

This reconfigures the old psychological notion of “subtext,” creating instead a sort of para-text, or, in Kristeva's terms, a phenotext, lying “beneath” the language, or just outside it, jarring in a subtle way, wrestling meaning from words, and words from the sad state of the world they are supposed to be describing. Barclay pulls words away from their habitual meanings, so that we see the words and the world afresh, gaining what in other contexts might be called critical distance, or a Brechtian alienation (always with the ultimate object to reconnect to some ineffable greater and deeper truth).

I love Barclay's work. If this piece was experimenting more than her shows normally do with pre-set dramatic structures, and if she was conjugating more language rules and gestural qualities or “levels of address” than her shows have in the past (*Word To Your Mama, No One, Rough Road, The Jesus Guy, Heart Oven Falling: Gotcha!*), it still suggests to me a radical experimentation with

meaning and its forms onstage. Burroughs and Gysin “cut up” language on the page; her cutting up “sacred” and “secular,” “personal” and “political,” “idiosyncratic” and “stereotypical” language and actions, tones and qualities onstage undoes a whole array of binary thought structures and patterns, to yield a strangely lucid event whose real subject and object can only be, in the end, the “reality grid” itself—what she calls the sense we have that inevitably

“this-is-the-way-that-things-are.” In that regard, she is creating the grounds for a conceptual, and aesthetic, “other possible world,” arguably the distinct object of both philosophy and theatre.

NOTE

1. Jacques Rancière, *Le partage du sensible: esthétique et politique*, Paris: La Fabrique-éditions, 2000, 35.

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