

2000-01 Theatre Season Reviews

Special Attractions

LIPSTICK TRACES

by Ken Urban

Lipstick Traces by Greil Marcus is an amazing book of cultural criticism, and the Rude Mech's adaptation of Marcus's messy and marvelous analysis is a wonder to behold. It is intelligent, fun and wonderfully staged, making it a must-see for lovers of punk and the historical avant-garde alike. ___Director Shawn Sides and writer Kirk Lynn hone in on the central concern of the unwieldy tome. Punk's penchant for negation, Marcus discerns, has far-reaching roots: the cabarets of the Dadaists during the '10s and '20s, the spectacles of Guy Debord during the Paris riots of '68, and perhaps even as far back as the ramblings of an aptly named 16th-century heretic John of Leyden who saw work as "unnatural." But rather than stage the argument, Sides and Lynn make it live by turning the book into a burlesque of events, all held together by a manic narrator clad in leather pants. It is a theatrical treat to see a staging of a Dadaist evening complete with a performance of a Hugo Ball sound poem. And the recreation of a Debord film, where a majority of the film is taken up by nothing more than a black screen, is amazingly funny.

The cast does a stellar job, with enough piss and vinegar to pull the whole thing off, and there are some fabulous dead-on impersonations to boot. David Greenspan does a great David Greenspan-as-Malcolm McLaren, the Sex Pistol's "pervert" of a manager. And James Urbaniak gives his Debord the right amount of French ironic earnestness. T. Ryder Smith is suitably creepy and compelling as Dada headmaster Richard Huelsenbeck. Jason Liebrecht, to his credit, has the hardest job: the near-impossible feat of playing Johnny Rotten. But Liebrecht pulls off Rotten's audition for the Sex Pistols with great aplomb. Alice Cooper was never this scary when he sang "I'm Eighteen."

There is so much to admire about this production, and much of the credit needs to go to Sides's flawless direction: tight and economical, yet far-reaching in scope. The script itself, however, could use some further thought, as it repeats some of the problems found in Marcus's argument. Where the hell did any discussion of class go? The Dadaists and Debord were hardly the working class kids that made up the British punk scene, and such a distinction is important to recognize. And in a book dominated by men, it seems a strange choice to add a sole female character, Dr. Narrator, only to make her a hysterical sexpot in tight

pants, Ph.D. or no Ph.D.

But such thoughts are, in the final analysis, only a testament to this smart and fun show. Your ears ring and your mind is spinning when you leave the Ohio Theatre. The Rude Mechs take a near-impossible book to adapt and transform it into a theatrical spectacle of the highest-order.

http://www.nytheatre.com/nytheatre/archweb/arch_013.htm