

Lipstick Traces

Conceived and directed by Shawn Sides. Adapted by Kirk Lynn from Greil Marcus's book. With David Greenspan and ensemble cast. Ohio Theatre (see Off Broadway).

Good evening, and welcome to *Lipstick Traces*," says the motormouthed narrator, before reassuring the audience that the most unlikely adaptation of the season will be better than they think. "It'll be fine. It's going to be difficult, but it's going to be fine."

But how could you not worry about a staged version of Greil Marcus's densely cerebral exercise in intellectual wanderlust? Besides having no story and an overload of esoteric ideas, *Traces* brashly links the Sex Pistols and the birth of punk to, among other things, the Dada art movement and the Paris student riots of 1968. The clear and present danger of this project is that it will either dumb down the book or, worse yet, turn it into a lecture. And not surprisingly, this production falls into both traps—though not as often as you would think. Like any good punk song, Shawn Sides and Kirk Lynn's cagey, taut concept piece is short, spastic and packed with energy. And it almost, just almost, convinces you that dramatizing *Traces* was a good idea.

The play is organized into a series of vignettes profiling a bunch of disparate movements that supposedly shared the same impulse: "a near absolute loathing of one's time and place." In one way, this reductionist history works better onstage. Once you strip away historical context and boil down characters to a few slogans, the connections between John Lydon (a viscerally intense Jason Liebrecht) and the 16th-century heretic John of Leyden (Ean Sheehy) do become more vivid. The flip side is that the portrayals thin into caricature: Guy Debord (James Urbaniak), the French critic of capitalism, is reduced to a self-righteous windbag.

Part of the allure of Marcus's book is that it gives young punk fans the sense that something momentous is going on when they turn on their stereo. The play's tone, thankfully, is generally lighter and more self-mocking. The narrator (Lana Lesley) even sends up the work's ambitions with a messy, incomprehensible cultural genealogy scrawled on a blackboard. In an epic four-minute turn, she tries to sum up the secret history of the 20th century using rapid-fire cue cards à la Bob Dylan's "Subterranean Homesick Blues" video. Like the Man and Woman in Edward Albee's *The Play About the Baby*, Lesley's MC leads the show's narrative while simultaneously breaking down the fourth wall: She calls the actors by their real names and mocks the quiet, decidedly un_punk-rock audience. "Don't boo...and for God's sake don't cheer. It's best to sit still like at the theater. Let's practice...very good."

The production's next best invention is David Greenspan's oily impersonation of Malcolm McLaren. With his hand snugly placed inside a mod jacket, the kinky-haired character actor captures the plastic, ironic expressions of the hipper-than-thou capitalist. You couldn't pull the grin off his face with a pair of pliers. He's the play's villain, representing all that is anathema to the original punk aesthetic—inauthenticity, image, the bottom line—while at the same time deserving credit for its creation. For millions of fans, including Greil Marcus, Johnny Rotten's crude, unbridled rage was a revelation. McLaren, however, called it "cash from chaos." —*Jason Zinoman*

<http://66.111.110.102/newyork/DetailsAr.do?file=theater/295/295.theat.lipstick.rev.html>