

Exhibitionism – *Local Arts Reviews*

By Robi Polgar

Lipstick Traces: Rock On!

Off Center, through September 15

Running time: 1 hr, 15 min

Lipstick Traces is a rock concert for your head. It's a lecture on history by your coolest professor with assistance from some of the quirkiest original thinkers of the last century. It is loud, defiant, informative, funny, absurd, literate, physical, and quick. It is quintessential Rude Mechanicals and a sign of a company having a great time with its art. From start to finish, this double-period-length play is full of theatrical explosiveness, compelling and contentious connections of history and thought, a pounding soundtrack with blazing lights, and that crucial sense that the performers are up there, working hard, for you, their audience.

This is the return engagement for *Lipstick Traces*, adapted from Greil Marcus' legendary tome that maps the evolution of the 20th century via detours, circular routes, and snap-back curves, from a Renaissance monk's heretical rant to the socially heretical rant of the Sex Pistols' Johnny Rotten, taking in Dada and other intellectual movements -- not to mention crass mass marketing -- along the way. The Rudes staged this play last year in New York and Austin, to well-earned acclaim, and if you didn't see it then, see it now.

Playwright Kirk Lynn and a team of contributing writers have turned Marcus' book into this play cum rock concert with wit and flair. And like a touring rock group returning to its hometown for that final gig of the sell-out tour, the Rudes show how they've grown in their craft and are clearly having fun sharing with their audiences.

As the group's lead singer, if you will, Lana Lesley radiates a captivating mix of innocence and smarts. Her Dr. Narrator helps link the play's onslaught of characters and ideas, and belts out a show-stopping 20th-Century-in-Five-Minutes finale like a diva on amphetamines. Sometimes Lesley seems breathless as she tries to catch up to all that information, but her acting is always secure; she's the sharpest of the company.

Still, her five male companions have some great moments of their own. Jason Liebrecht is

hypnotic as Johnny Rotten, an oddly normal young man who appears to have been dragged into the play against his will. His downstage monologue, right at the feet of the front row, is unexpectedly personal, eerily astute. Ehren Conner Christian's Malcolm McLaren, creator of the Sex Pistols (or not, depending on who you believe), acts as something of the Narrator's bad-boy sidekick, getting laughs as he smarmily disputes ideas or takes over the narration with a particularly self-inflated world view. Gavin Mundy delivers a hilariously understated Guy Debord, whose unique film presentation is comedy at once subtle and outlandish. Michael T. Mergen and Robert Pierson round out the cast with solid performances, notably Mergen's Renaissance Dutch monk, the *ur*-punk John of Leyden, and Pierson's deadpan Richard Huelsenbeck.

Director Shawn Sides provides clever guidance, finding stage images that bump up the theatricality while keeping the rhythm of the performances exceptionally well tied to the script. The atmospherics provided by sound designer Gordon Gunn and lighting designer Zach Murphy are equally brilliant: highly evocative, colorful lights, and sounds and music so strong that they pulsate inside your body.

As at any great rock concert, there are times when you sense that the group has gotten comfortable, that it's playing by numbers. Sides' use of long, slow, direct crosses from upstage to downstage create movement onstage, but to what purpose? And when Mergen attempts the standard Suzuki slow-motion kneel, he's shaking so hard that you wonder what kind of martyrdom the actor is going through, forget the character. Christian occasionally relies too heavily on trademark, sudden eye-popping glances and arms that rocket out to his sides, fingers splayed. And for all the fun and intelligent stage work, this is not a show that will haunt the memory; its immediacy vanishes like that final guitar chord into the sweat-beer-cigarette haze. You can say you were there, that it was great, that "I hung with the band, man!" But you can't rekindle the feeling of being there once you're back at work.

But do you need more than that for a great night out these days? In just over an hour, the Rudes capture Marcus' book with the raw flair of an earth-stopping snarl of feedback. With all that energy and thought compressed into such a short period of time, you have to leave the theatre enthralled. Since their inception, the Rudes have thrived on what Johnny Rotten refers to as "barely organized chaos," not always to good effect when onstage sloppiness overran theatricality. With *Lipstick Traces*, the company has come into its own, adeptly creating a hyper-organized chaos: literate, intelligent, fun theatre with a unique, rock & roll edge.