

# Newsday

## NEWSDAY

### **A Johnny Rotten Curse Traced to Its Roots**

**By Gordon Cox.**

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'LIPSTICK TRACES' is about Johnny Rotten and the aftershocks of the Sex Pistols, the punk band Rotten fronted. It's about the 1968 uprisings in Paris, and the small group of intellectuals who influenced those riots. It's about Dada, and it's about a 16th century heretic named John of Leyden. It's also about 75 minutes long.

The show, which opened last night at the Ohio Theater in SoHo, is as fast and loud and anarchic as a Sex Pistols song. With unpredictable, lightning-bolt energy, "Lipstick Traces" gallops wildly into a decidedly academic investigation - "the genealogy of an impulse" that rekindles and resurfaces throughout history. It seems as if this disquisition couldn't possibly be very funny, very energizing or very cohesive, but it's all these things thanks to the speed, skill and unpretentious intellect of director Shawn Sides and her collaborators in this unruly assault of an adaptation.

A staggeringly unlikely inspiration for a theater event, the 1989 cult book "Lipstick Traces," by rock critic Greil Marcus, is a hefty tome that examines the confrontational destabilization that characterized punk, and follows the urge's antecedents back through the ages. The production takes its echoing, haphazard structure from the web of interconnections that Marcus maps out with delirious erudition over the course of his treatise's nearly 500 fervent pages.

The scholarly nature of the endeavor is embodied in the character Dr. Narrator, an easily flustered PhD filled with anxiety about historical accuracy and played with a cracked veneer of probity by Lana Lesley. The irrepressible, mischievous side of the project comes to life in Malcolm McLaren (David Greenspan, cigarette held aloft and voice dripping with amused self-satisfaction), the real-life shopkeeper who created and marketed the Sex Pistols.

These two serve as our tour guides through the varied terrain of "Traces." We witness a screening of a 1952 film by the cultural theorist Guy Debord (a hilariously deadpan James Urbaniak). We hear an invented speech by the Dadaist, poet and medical student Richard Huelsenbeck (T. Ryder Smith, whose furtive smile and hushed tones make us think he's revealing secrets of the utmost importance). Oh, and of course we meet Johnny Rotten (Jason Liebrecht), who gives us a glimpse of his bull-in-a-china-shop version of being a rock star.

In the show's neatest distillation of Marcus' text, the performers enact a 1976 TV interview that shocked Britain when Rotten audibly cursed, but here the actors playing the other Sex Pistols remain dressed as the historical philosophers they've portrayed throughout the show. It's as if all these radical thinkers have come together with an ultimate aim that's nothing more-and nothing less-than swearing on live television. That's the argument of the book summed up in one succinct stage picture, and that's the profane impulse traced by "Lipstick Traces" with such raucous glee.