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THEATER REVIEW; A Lecture on Punk May Not Be What You Think

By BEN BRANTLEY

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The narrator, who obviously has nerves of hamburger, doesn't interrupt her carefully memorized discourse. But her abstract words slide into screeches whenever the noisy guy in the ripped clothes dances too close to her. This is understandable, since the dancing -- performed by one Johnny Rotten, who is auditioning to be the lead singer of the Sex Pistols -- easily qualifies as assault and battery.

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So much for academic distance. The scene described above is a re-enactment of the day in 1975 that Johnny Rotten (played by Jason Liebrecht) hooked up with Malcolm McLaren (David Greenspan), the London boutique owner and self-styled cultural con artist. But as flamboyant as these two may be, the narrator (officially named Dr. Narrator) doesn't fade into the wallpaper, although she's trying to.

As portrayed by Lana Lesley, Dr. Narrator is anxious, uncertain, engaged, a tad frenzied. You can't rely on what she says, and she knows it. But the eeks make you trust her, in a strange way. Because how could anyone get so close to flame and stay cool?

The equivalent of Ms. Lesley's squeals are heard throughout the book of the same title that inspired these 75 minutes of meticulously organized mayhem now at the Ohio Theater, created by a company from Austin, Tex., called the Rude Mechs, and presented in New York by the Foundry Theater.

"Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century," written by the rock journalist Greil Marcus and published in 1989, time-travels on the wings of philosophy, history, conjecture and copious research to visit parallel movements of cultural rebellion. All stemming from what Mr. Marcus calls the impulse of negation, they range dizzyingly from punk to Dadism, from French Situationism to Anabaptism.

The book has the energy of its obsessions, and it snares you in the manner of those intense, questing and often stoned sessions of intellectual debate you may have experienced in your college years. It was destined, in other words, to achieve cult status.

Among the cultists were a group of artists foolhardy enough to try to translate the book to the stage. The results are inevitably uneven. But as conceived and directed by Shawn Sides and adapted by Kirk Lynn, "Lipstick Traces" has a surprisingly high success rate in finding theatrical equivalents for Mr. Marcus's fervid brand of scholarship. The eeks are just the beginning.

The production is a series of melting set pieces interspersed with commentary from the studiously uneasy Dr. Narrator, who explains, "I'm nonfiction, but I'm not real." Calculated self-consciousness is clearly the order of the day.

Performers repeatedly break character to thank one another using their real names. And the daunting scope of their undertaking is winkingly acknowledged by complex scrawled cultural genealogy charts and a climactic four-and-a-half-minute summary of the entire 20th century.

This may sound precious, and some of it is. But there are many moments that pulse with verve and ingenuity, in which resonantly simple solutions are found for presenting the seemingly unstageable.

The intersection of different time periods, for example, registers neatly in a Sex Pistols television interview in which Johnny Rotten's fellow band members are in the costumes of his historical ancestors, all of whom we have met earlier: John of Leyden (Ean Sheehy), the 16th-century heretic; Guy Debord (James Urbaniak), the French Situationist leader of the mid-20th century; and the Dadaist psychiatrist Richard Huelsenbeck (T. Ryder Smith).

The play wisely avoids trying to recreate the Sex Pistols in performance, and the only punk music we hear is in shards of recorded sound. We do get to see Mr. Liebrecht's inspired, aggressively spastic version of Johnny Rotten doing Alice Cooper's "18."

And we are treated to an absolutely blissful interpretation of a high point in Dada lore: an evening at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916 when Tristan Tzara (Mr. Sheehy), Hugo Ball (Mr. Urbaniak) and Huelsenbeck perform in a counterpoint of nonsense sounds and movements. Of course what actually happened was probably nothing like that, but the scene has a real visceral charge of liberating anarchy that makes it the evening's cornerstone.

The ensemble, which mixes New York actors with original members, aspires to the rarefied dissociative style of the Wooster Group, apparently a significant influence on the company. It doesn't quite achieve that, although Ms. Lesley comes close in the early part of the show. And Mr. Smith's renderings of speeches by Huelsenbeck, in which words slowly shed their meanings, are pitch-perfect.

Mr. Greenspan, a favorite of downtown audiences, brings his trademark archness and a slipping, soon discarded British accent to the role of Mr. McLaren, which underscores the idea of the entrepreneur as a capitalist Mephistopheles. This is too easy a characterization, an example of how the stage version of "Lipstick Traces" can't avoid boiling down and oversimplifying the shifting arguments of the book.

Nonetheless, for a production that has more words per minute than "The Invention of Love," "Lipstick Traces" is remarkable for seldom coming across as a talking abridged book. The technical team of Heather

Carson (lights), Darron L. West (sound) and Jim Larkin (sets) milks shivery subliminal effects from minimal resources.

The evening's single most potent moment involves no words at all. It comes after a calm, contemptuous monologue from Johnny Rotten that interprets the past, like all the other individual analyses offered here, in highly suspect ways.

Mr. Liebrecht's Johnny drops the microphone on the floor, where it rolls gently in a narrowing spotlight. It seems to be waiting for the next disaffected voice that wants to be amplified. If Ms. Lesley's eeks suggest Mr. Marcus's passionate engagement with his subject, that lingering microphone captures his respect for the mystery behind the art that so fascinates him.

LIPSTICK TRACES

A Secret History of the 20th Century

Conceived and directed by Shawn Sides; adapted by Kirk Lynn; based on the book by Greil Marcus. Created by Rude Mechs of Austin, Tex. Lighting by Heather Carson; sets by Jim Larkin; sound by Darron L. West; costumes by Rachel Carr; production stage manager, Sarah Richardson; associate producer, Tim Fisk; production manager, Martin Stevenson. Presented by the Foundry Theater, Melanie Joseph, artistic director. At the Ohio Theater, 66 Wooster Street, SoHo.

WITH: Ean Sheehy (John of Leyden, Tristan Tzara and Michel Murre), David Greenspan (Malcolm McLaren and Bill Grundy), Lana Lesley (Dr. Narrator), James Urbaniak (Hugo Ball, Steve Jones and Guy Debord), T. Ryder Smith (Richard Huelsenbeck) and Jason Liebrecht (Johnny Rotten).

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