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THEATER REVIEW

Ode to Anarchy – Never mind the Bollocks, here's 'Lipstick Traces,' an oddball trajectory tracing rebellion through time

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History repeats itself: first as tragedy, then as farce, then as a spitting, preening British punk rock quartet. In radically abridged form, that's the exhilarating thesis that drove "Lipstick Traces," the 1989 cult-classic "secret history of the 20th century" by Greil Marcus, the Claude Levi-Strauss of contemporary music critics.

Did we say "history"? But what, exactly, is that? "Perhaps it's getting the last word," proposes Malcolm McLaren, the Rasputin-like London boutique owner and calculating impresario behind the Sex Pistols, the proto-punk outfit whose ornery stage theatrics and marginal technical competence failed to disguise its passion, raging intelligence and notorious refusal to play by the rules of bloated, self-important, mid-'70s corporate rock.

In the breakneck, fitfully transcendent adaptation of Marcus' book that's now tearing up the seats at UCLA's Macgowan Little Theater, it only deepens the audience's amusement and moral turbulence that McLaren is being played by the dandyish Henry Stram, walking a mincing line between characterization and impersonation, as a cross between P.T. Barnum and Oscar Wilde.

And why not? If even rebellion can be turned into a commodity under modern capitalism, why shouldn't the Malcolm McLarens of this world make a fast buck off all the youthful fear and loathing hanging out on Kings Road? Or Melrose Avenue, for that matter?

Yet back, for a moment, to Marcus' book, whose splintered insights and cut-and-paste aesthetic have been ingeniously captured in this suitably self-subverting adaptation by the Rude Mechanicals ensemble out of Austin, Texas (kudos to playwright-adapter Kirk Lynn).

Lying flat on the printed page, "Lipstick Traces" is a big, artfully unruly, semi-underground guide to mad-prophet role models and the savage creativity spawned by civilization and its discontents. Assembling a prismatic narrative out of misplaced historical footnotes, bizarre convergences and sparkling, philosophical prose, Marcus drew startling connections between seemingly disjointed cultural occurrences and their compelling frontmen.

Free-associating with impunity, and minting aphorisms apparently at will, "Lipstick Traces" charted a smeary, oddball trajectory from the heretic preachings of 16th century priest John of Leyden, to the anti-art pranksterism of the dadaist bad boys, to the neo-socialist paradoxes of the student-led Situationist International, which paralyzed France with a series of work stoppages in 1968.

Cross-cutting with furious ambition, the Rude Mechs re-imagine episodes from these transformative epochs with a witty resourcefulness, enhanced by the simple, effective design team of Darron West (sound), Brian Scott (lights) and Rachel Carr (costumes). The show gets off to a smash-mouth start as Marcus' scholarly stand-in, Dr. Narrator (Lana Lesley), grabs a mike and plays analyst-hostess to the show's time-tripping dramatis personae.

A sonic blast and a battery of stage lights usher in John of Leyden (Darren Pettie), bellowing his gospel of permissive pleasures like some millenarian rock god. In a flash, director Shawn Sides' inventive staging whisks us to the Cabaret Voltaire, where the dadaists vented their absurdist anger at a decadent Europe worn out by World War I. Suggesting a lost episode of "Beyond the Fringe," the scene is a scary, risible dance of sublimated violence and vulnerability, given life by actors Pettie, Randolph Curtis Rand and T. Ryder Smith, who's superbly menacing as dadaist poet Richard Huelsenbeck.

Finally--or, rather, elliptically, in the style of Marcus' riffing revisionism--the show segues to the anarchic, off-key ravings of John Lydon, a.k.a. Johnny Rotten, the Sex Pistols' coruscating lead singer, well-played by a sneeringly

charismatic Jason Liebrecht.

Re-creating Rotten's (in)famous Sex Pistols "audition," when he growled and slurred his way through Alice Cooper's "18," "Lipstick Traces" suggests that what the dadaists were to spiritually bankrupt Europe in 1920, the Sex Pistols were to a British nation that was paralyzed in the late '70s by strikes, rising oil prices and a pervasive cynicism about the shriveling of the promised good life.

But never mind the bollocks. What gives this stage version its pop and sting isn't just Marcus' provocative theorems, which the kinetic six-member cast obligingly diagrams on a blackboard at one point. Blurring by in 75 intermission-less minutes, "Lipstick Traces" is always threatening to drop through the floor, to disintegrate into its own slightly juvenile self-consciousness.

Yet it stays aloft through its raw, unnerving energy, restless idea-shuffling and a kind of brutally wistful poetry such as you might encounter in an early Raymond Pettibon drawing. Sprinting, at times, toward the brink of incoherence, the show escapes its aggressive pedantry by leapfrogging backward over itself, leaving the audience struggling to keep up.

Needless to say, "Lipstick Traces" won't be everyone's pint of strychnine-laced Guinness.

But as Rotten might paraphrase Picasso, art is a lie that makes us drink, fight, swear, puke, stick a safety pin in our cheek, drink some more and, yes, eventually see the truth. The Sex Pistols showed young Brits, and other youth the world over, how to party on truth's wreckage. No matter, for the moment, if we were really only dancing on our culture's exquisite corpse.

"Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century" at Macgowan Little Theater, UCLA, Wyton Drive and Sunset Boulevard, L.A. Tuesdays-Saturdays, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 7 p.m. Ends Oct. 20. \$35. (310) 825-2101.