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Re-Staging the Sex Pistols

"Lipstick Traces" adapts Greil Marcus' unadaptable book

Did the Sex Pistols make history? Not the history you find in magazines or on game shows, but the kind that actually reverberates decades, even centuries later. The narrator of *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, the exhilarating theatrical adaptation of Greil Marcus' seemingly unadaptable book, which is currently running at New York City's Foundry Theatre, is anxious to know.

It's a good question. Outside England, where punk's canniest group caused a colossal stir during its brief reign of chaos, the Sex Pistols are mostly remembered as a fleeting curiosity. When we encounter lead singer Johnny Rotten these days, he's on VH1. But pop music, institutional as it has become, has brought about an impressive number of free-world upheavals since its inception, and the one the Pistols represented ranks right up there. The message was as brutish as a Steve Jones power chord: The utopian pipe dreams of the Sixties were dead, and no amount of canned civility could bring them back.

Drawing jagged parallels between Johnny Rotten's built-in bullshit detector and the logic-defying social commentaries of the underground dada and Situationist movements, Marcus' dense book has been required reading among a certain faction of the well-educated, downwardly mobile class since its 1989 publication. (Members of Rude Mechs, the Austin, Texas theater company that first mounted the play a year ago, told the author they considered the book "bathroom reading" -- and meant it as high praise.)

Sure, the Sex Pistols were phenomenal theater, but how to make the author's chance connections and zigzagging insights into a coherent play? Coherence, as it turns out, is the very thing under seige in *Lipstick Traces*, and it takes an awful (and awfully convincing) beating.

From the delirious, perfectly calibrated slapstick of a pivotal night at the World War I-era Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich to a reenactment of Rotten's Sex Pistols audition, in which he demolishes Alice Cooper's "Eighteen" as the original version plays on a jukebox in Malcolm McLaren's sex shop, the play's vignettes mount a lethal assault on the modern world's prevailing go-along-to-get-along attitude. A barrage of disembodied slogans -- "What are the politics of boredom?", "I am nothing, and I should be everything" -- provide the shrapnel.

Those mountains of trash that fed punk's revulsion in mid-Seventies London, as documented in the recent Sex Pistols reconsideration *The Filth and the Fury*, are reduced in the play to a single, half-size Dumpster. The metal box doubles as the jukebox, signified by two words spray painted on the side: "Juke Box." Other than that and a chalkboard, the stage of Soho's Ohio Theater is barren -- floorboards, black curtains, a few junk-shop chandeliers strung up overhead. It's the proverbial blank slate, and these actors take full advantage.

The cast has the killer instinct. Austin actor Jason Liebrecht reprises his role as the demonic Johnny Rotten. James Urbaniak

("Henry Fool," "Sweet and Lowdown") has a gleeful turn as cardigan-wearing Guy Debord, the confounding Situationist figurehead. As Malcolm McLaren, the Pistols' self-congratulatory manager, David Greenspan wears a silver sharkskin suit that's so shiny it looks like it's been oiled. And Lana Lesley, in the servile but crucial role of Dr. Narrator, reduces an entire alternate history of the 20th century to an astounding four-and-a-half minute rant -- just a minute longer than "Anarchy in the U.K.," almost two more than "Liar."

"You should never be completely understood," counsels the Rotten character near the finish of this epic-in-miniature. It's one of the many thoughts, hard as ball bearings, that rattle around in the brainpan long after the play is over. Official history may be doomed to repeat itself. The unofficial kind seems brand new every time.

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