

Rusty Pistols

Written by Doug Harvey



Photo by Joan Marcus

The Foundry Theater's *Lipstick Traces*, sans saliva

TRANSLATING ANY BOOK INTO THE THEATRICAL idiom is a risky proposition, but when the book is a plotless, meandering 496-page jumble of art, politics and pop cultural history, the odds of pulling it off become astronomical. Nevertheless, when Austin's Rude Mechs production collective set out to produce an adaptation of rock critic Greil Marcus' controversial 1989 cult textbook, *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the 20th Century*, they found themselves with a surprise hit.

Marcus' book was something of a phenomenon -- shaking up the standards for academic cultural studies scholarship, injecting a sense of rebellious urgency in the bloated '80s art world and introducing a mainstream literate audience to the midcentury European rabble-rousers of the Lettriste and Situationist movements. Along the way, he rooted out (or fabricated) a skein of interconnections among punk, the early-20th-century Dadaists, French revolutionary Louis-Antoine Leon de Saint-Just, and 16th-century Dutch Anabaptist heretic John of Leyden.

While the theatrical version name-checks all these and more, its focus is squarely on the Sex Pistols, featuring Henry Stram's particularly dead-on impersonation of the band's smarmy impresario, Malcolm McLaren. Clocking in at a punchy 75 minutes, the transplanted Foundry Theater production -- at UCLA's Macgowan Little Theater -- carefully paces portions of didactic cultural revisionism (the Cliffs Notes Live! version of Marcus' tome) against orchestrated bursts of simulated chaos. The most memorable of these include a dazzlingly choreographed re-creation of a three-man simultaneous nonsense poetry performance in the legendary Dadaist Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, and a creepily verbatim re-enactment of the Sex Pistols incendiary (They said the F word!) 1976 appearance on the BBC's Bill & Grundy show. (I always had problems with Marcus' treatment of Dada and Situationism, but the Sex Pistols sections were excellent in spite of their distance from the subject matter. His book was published 13 years after the Pistols' appearance on the Grundy show. And the Foundry Theater's staging is now 13 years after that.)

THE SHEER CONCEPTUAL AWKWARDNESS of these calculated explosions -- meticulously rehearsed depictions of spontaneous, anarchic creative outbursts -- points up the main flaw in the work as a whole. Like so many institutional translations of punk, *Lipstick Traces* is too true to the letter of insurgency and almost devoid of the spirit. In Marcus' book, the impossibility of fixing such moments in history was at least given lip service -- though utterly buried by the author's obvious delight in arcane cultural scholarship. The play wants to have its pomo cake and eat it too, retaining McLaren's self-proclaimed Svengali cynicism, using irony as a sort of fail-safe mechanism of plausible deniability, while milking the earnest, organic populism of punk's sound and fury for all its dramatic worth. Up to a point.

For a play about the role of the trickster in Western cultural history, *Lipstick Traces* maintains a too-

polite distance between its own staging and the post-Artaud punk-analogous confrontational-theater forms of the '60s and '70s. Certainly Brian Scott's inventive lighting design has its moments of obnoxious intrusiveness, and the conceit of the actors addressing one another by their actual names nudges the fourth wall, but there's no spitting -- and the occasional moments of group electricity never once threaten to spill over into real life and discomfit the audience.

Which is as it should be in a play *about* a book *about* punk rock. And though the Rude Mechs' stage version provides an impressive condensation and an intelligent and exciting entertainment, it fails to tap into the primordial energy of the subject matter, and winds up at an even further remove. This gap is most palpable to those who are already familiar with the details of this "secret history." Putting aside quibbles about content and ultimate futility, there's not much new information here, and the experience becomes, by default, a question of formalism -- good acting, inventive staging, clever writing. For the uninitiated -- and most of the aging and unresponsive opening-night audience looked distinctly granola-fed -- the kaleidoscopic blur of stories and action might well make for an exhilarating introduction to a world of new ideas. Just as long as they don't come away imagining they've had an actual experience.

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