

theater

Seventeen Liar Bodies

Lipstick Traces at the Ohio Theatre

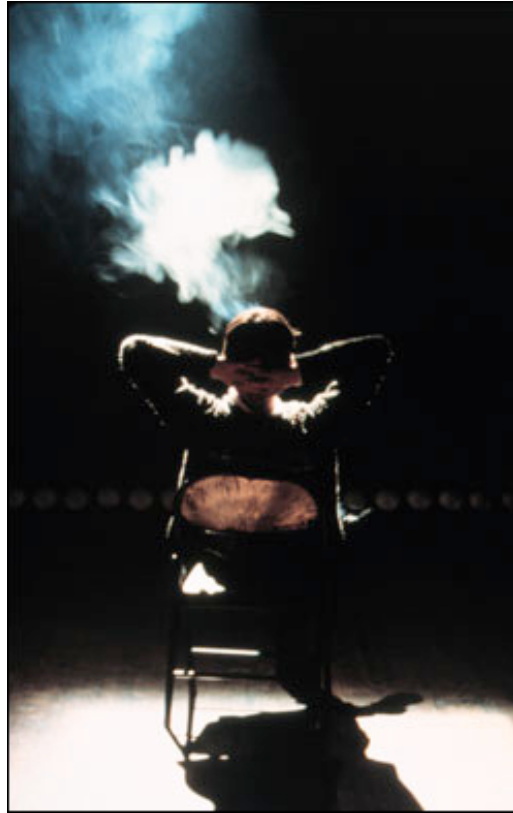
by Jessica Winter

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Devout popular-music scholar and anything-goes sociologist, Greil Marcus only connects—and when that fails, only projects. For him, one throwaway couplet in a radio hit can hopelessly tangle the threads of rock genealogy; one squall of feedback can summon ancestral specters from far-flung mediums, cultures, and vernaculars. The idea of pop song as secret sharer glints off the titles of his books: *Mystery Train*; *Invisible Republic*; and perhaps his quintessential work, *Lipstick Traces*, in which the Sex Pistols' brief, riotous holiday in the sun marks the starting line for stream-of-consciousness yo-yo anthropology. Johnny Rotten, et al., become collaborative players in Marcus's totalizing, mutable history play; the Rude Mechs company literalize the conceit with a fast and furious staging of *Lipstick Traces*, a hilarious, unexpectedly haunted compression of the cult tome.



Pretty not vacant: Urbaniak as Guy Debord
photo: Joan Marcus

Lipstick Traces

Conceived and directed by Shawn Sides, adapted by Kirk Lynn, from the book by Greil Marcus, presented by the Foundry Theatre
Ohio Theatre
66 Wooster Street
800-965-4827

In this case, acting about rock criticism doesn't amount to dancing about architecture. Hosted by nervous hipster Dr. Narrator (Lana Lesley) and smug fop Malcolm McLaren (David Greenspan), *Lipstick Traces* isn't plotless so much as simply omnidirectional. Chronology dissolves; prophecies happen in reverse. McLaren, the latter-day Situationist, rubs shoulders with real-deal Guy Debord (James Urbaniak). German heretic John of Leyden (Ean Sheehy)—who decided that he was king of the New Jerusalem, Münster, four centuries before John Lydon (Jason Liebrecht) proclaimed himself the Antichrist—sits alongside his coincidental namesake during the infamous Bill Grundy interview. A cacophonous, gloriously deranged Cabaret Voltaire performance (with Urbaniak as Hugo Ball, Sheehy as Tristan Tzara, and the extraordinary T. Ryder Smith as Richard Huelsenbeck) establishes a precedent for Rotten's storied Pistols audition, where he

stalks, barks, gargles, and peacocks his way through a song he barely knows (Alice Cooper's "I'm Eighteen"). But somehow, the Dada trio, directed for maximum Keystone Kop kinesia by Shawn Sides, seems retroactively influenced by the Ministry of Silly Walks. (Marcus dedicated *Lipstick Traces* in part to Monty Python.)

The comedy, like the proscenium, often fades to black; the play defies time, and yet it's clouded over by a sense of impending doom. Matching the macabre photograph of Rotten that takes up a page of the book, the actors are harshly illuminated from below, shadows hollowing their eyes to sockets. They often break character or switch roles; when they exit the stage, Dr. Narrator not only thanks them but addresses them by their real names. The rueful Brechtian maneuvering (admittedly strained at times) negates Pete Townshend's encomium, "When you listen to the Sex Pistols . . . what immediately strikes you is that *this is actually happening*"—and so does putting Townshend's words in the mouth of their flamboyantly cynical manager. (McLaren/Greenspan poses his cigarette at such an ostentatiously awkward angle that it's a distancing gesture in itself.) When some mute bloke dressed as Dada Death first arrives, he's just another cheeky freak blowing raspberries at the Silver Jubilee. The longer he sticks around, though, the more he takes on the menacing air of a silent inquisitor. No future for you.

The Sex Pistols, at least as far as McLaren was concerned, were an eight-legged readymade. He claimed it didn't matter who you got to be in your band, so long as they hated each other and they couldn't play. Julien Temple took this posture to its logical extreme in his pseudo-documentary *The Great Rock 'n' Roll Swindle*, where a parade of Johnnys-on-the-spot grab the mic in place of the departed lead singer. All the same, Liebrecht faces a tough task as the inimitable destroyer of passersby, but he nails Rotten's wet-cat vulnerability and smirking rage. And if Rotten/Liebrecht's larynx-scraping redefines sound poetry, then Smith seems to channel it (*this is actually happening*) with his Huelsenbeck interpretation: a tour de force of howling gibberish that articulates a panic and despair beyond speech, a noise alternately subhuman and supernatural.

If you listen closely, you can hear that same noise on *Never Mind the Bollocks*. When Rotten auditions in *Lipstick Traces*, Dr. Narrator leaps up to analyze the performance: "The desire this voice embodies is patent and simple! It begins with the demand to live not as an object but as a subject of history!" The absurdist juxtaposition wittily points up pop music as the raw material for the listener's own invisible republic of personal obsessions and reference points—a liberating form of autobiography. Toward the evening's end, Dr. Narrator barrels through what she calls "the 20th century in four minutes and 30 seconds." As the actors throw off flash cards like Dylan in *Don't Look Back*, she auction-calls a hundred years, fitting her mom's birth in with World War II and linking her split with her first boyfriend to the breakup of the Dadaists after Zurich. As much as *Lipstick Traces* is the thrilling, bottomless story of how a Situation became a band (and vice versa), it's also the story of how a fan becomes a disciple. Plus it name-checks Hüsker Dü's "Never Talking to You Again" and the Lettrists International in nearly the same breath. A little no and a big Yes.

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