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"Traces of anarchy, Sex Pistols" – Review

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By Donald Lyons

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The key moments of radical rock in the 20th century are now seen as theatrical occasions.

For example the unforgettable first album of the Velvet Underground, "The Velvet Underground and Nico" – the record that had an Andy Warhol banana on the cover – is being performed with actor-musicians this Sunday at 9 pm at Arlene Grocery (95 Stanton St.).

Similarly, the early history – and pre-history – of the Sex Pistols is being enacted in "Lipstick Traces," based upon Greil Marcus' book of the same name.

Marcus attempted to trace a history of artistic anarchy and nihilism, a history that climaxed in the Sex Pistols. His book has been adapted by Kirk Lynn and directed by Shawn Sides into a witty, rip-roaring, confusing, mad 75 minutes at the Ohio Theatre.

There are two wildly smoking figures who guide us through history toward the Pistols. There's Dr. Narrator, enacted with crisp, efficient authority by the attractive Lana Lesley, and there's the cynical, openly manipulative Englishman, Malcolm McLaren.

McLaren, a sex-shop keeper, saw the need for the Pistols and claimed to have invented them. He is deliciously impersonated by David Greenspan, who smokes dramatically and drawls theatrically and poses as a know-it-all.

These two are our guides, reliable or not.

They start by evoking a rebellious medieval monk, John of Leyden, played by a somber, demented Ean Sheehy. The name John of Leyden is, of course, meant as a playful forerunner of John Lydon, a.k.a. Johnny Rotten, lead singer of the Sex Pistols – a rather weak piece of humor.

Then we come to 1916, when there was much nonsensical cavorting in Zurich by Tristan Tzara, a leading Surrealist – also played by Sheehy. Then in 1975, McLaren putting plugs in his ears, invents the Sex Pistols, with commercial calculation.

The times, he feels, are right for such a phenomenon; they can't play and they don't care. But Johnny Rotten, played beautifully by Jason Liebrecht, has sass and contempt and fire. He sings "18" at the audition, throwing himself around and climbing on the jukebox. It's an electric (in every sense) moment.

Then the play takes tiresome and unconvincing turns in trying to trace the history of nihilism. We're at a cinema in Paris in the 1980's, where Dr. Narrator and McLaren watch an empty screen lit only by their own curling smoke. Leyden returns to claim he invented the character of Johnny Rotten, basing it on Laurence Olivier's Richard III.

So what gives? Was it all nihilism, a serious artistic statement reacting to the horrors of 20th century history? Or was it a commercial hoax? Or was it a twist on Richard III? The play (I haven't read the book) never decided coherently.

But along the way, it provides stylish, dangerous fun.