

## Arts Review

By Heather Barfield Cole



### Index to Idioms

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Idioms are expressions, grammatical constructions that often signify something other than literal interpretations of words. In American English, as in other languages, to understand idioms one must have some linguistic and cultural frame of reference which, when pooled with a particular gestalt, condenses experience into a cognitive sequence of meaning. Deb Margolin's *Index to Idioms* played with constructions of idioms beyond our learned assumptions. She blissfully indulged in poetic metaphors and the "collapsible boundary between memoir and fiction" through adventures in adolescence, motherhood, illness, innocence, the mesmerizing force of watching bodies perform, sexuality, and love through an indexical list of about a dozen idioms.

As the first artist in the Rude Mechanicals' 2005 Throws Like a Girl series, Margolin was aflame and valiant. The playwright, performer, and founding member of the New York-based Split Britches Theater Company brought vitality to the performing action by embodying text in intimate visual and narrative expositions. A large screen with gold cloth draped over it displayed images pertinent to the subject. Margolin sat below, eyes closed, listening intently to an elegiac melody. A photograph of a bathroom and toilet glowed behind her. Then her eyes

sporadically popped open in panic as increasingly distressed children's voices interrupted her short-lived ecstasies of privacy. Margolin cleverly uncovered tensions and intersections between maternal responsibilities and a longing for beauty and peace.

Those moments manifested in ruminations on such idiomatic expressions as "face the music." In the sheltered seclusion of her car, songs on the radio uniquely dramatized bodies moving outside the windshield screen. Elderly women played chess to the Doors' "Riders on the Storm," and Mozart composed a soundtrack to the mess of children's scurrying on a soccer field. Face the music, from an expression about accepting criticism for guilty actions, expanded outward into the arena of pedestrian behavior, humanizing strangers with eloquent wit.

As she committed "ontological vandalism," Margolin lessened the stack of papers that she carried through the performance. Script pages, each with unique letters tumbling coherently to create sentences, structures, and thoughts, became like square snowflakes whitening the stage floor in chaotic elegance. While working as a typographer during college, Margolin literalized the expression "minding one's p's and q's." One night shift, an impassioned book editor vividly described for her a brazen typeface as if its letters were masterful sculpture. Margolin searched through books to locate the form so beloved by the man, eventually matching his description to the Palatino font. Exalted by symbolic exquisiteness, Margolin punctuated the pleasures of proofreading.

In another story, Margolin's son contemplated the ingestion of mortality after she offered him fish for lunch instead of his usual macaroni and cheese. "Bite the dust," a glib word assembly of death, unraveled a moment of innocent inquiry. The boy rationalized that, in order to grow, he needed food to eat, and the fish, once alive, would transfer that life into his body to propel his maturity. Biting into death is swallowing life, fervently, joyously, taking the bittersweet with the sour so that taste buds dance with variety. Margolin, along with director Merri Milwe, let nature take its course through fleeting deaths of theatrical mediation and meditation. Throughout, Margolin's insightful musings were like an accordion stretching out the subtle reflections of being which had lain hidden between the folds far too long. Music to our ears.