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Star of Stage and Screenplay

Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar adapt a script for a very French dance experience

By Susan Reiter



Because their latest work for Big Dance Theater was co-commissioned by the French Institute/Alliance Française and Les Subsistances in Lyon, co-directors Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar began exploring possible French source material. They gravitated to the influential films of the Nouvelle Vague, but instead of renting DVDs, they read the screenplays. They made that their focus, Parson explained recently, “because I felt that stylistically, the films are so powerful visually that there would be no place for me in it. So I wanted some vestige or artifact from that period.”

They read and rejected quite a few screenplays before landing on *Cléo From 5 to 7*, Agnes Varda’s first feature, made in 1961. It follows a young, modestly successful pop singer through the early evening hours as she awaits the potentially dire results of a medical examination. “With a lot of the scripts, I couldn’t relate to the subject matter at all,” Parson said. “*Cléo* was the first one that wasn’t about an affair, or a young woman’s coming of age sexually. The subject matter excited me, and I loved the divisions of time. It’s famous for being in real time and it’s broken up in funny places, in surprising places, by chapter headings.”

Parson and Lazar—she choreographs, while they share directorial credit—have collaborated on many distinctive, often idiosyncratic works for BDT. What they share is that each conjures up a specific world, and incorporates a varied, blend of elements—from theater, dance music and now



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video—to bring these imaginative worlds to vivid life on stage. For this piece, *Comme Toujours Here I Stand*, they included all of the screenplay’s dialogue, while layering in “off-camera” scenes and conversations involving the actress who portrays Cléo.

“We’re using the obstacles of staging a script in a theatrical form to make a new piece. So it’s an adaptation of a screenplay,” Parson said. An array of constantly changing costumes by Claudia Stephens allude to early ‘60s chic (large sunglasses for many characters!) while video by Jeff Larson plays a crucial role in propelling the drama and providing the shifts between “on” and “off” camera situations.

The creative team and performers, most of them BDT veterans like Molly Hickok, who portrays Cléo, were in Lyon for an extended residency last year, so *Comme Toujours* benefited from a first-hand immersion in France itself. Their experiences making the piece there fed into the “off-camera” sequences, just as Parson’s observation that “Lyon is filled with ancient stairs that go up the sides of the hills” influenced the inclusion of a rolling staircase that is a central set piece.

The film’s title, Parson explained, incorporates a European expression referring to the time of day when people conducted their romantic liaisons. While others were out conducting their affairs, she suggests, the singer “was having an affair with death.” Petulant and self-dramatizing, Cleo veers between mundanity and mortality, with the streets, faces and overheard conversations of Paris reflecting and influencing her moods.

The meticulously charted time sequence of the film, following Cléo, her confidante/personal assistant, the man in her life, her songwriting team, a free-spirited artists’ model and a man Cléo encounters in a park, actually concludes at 6:30 p.m. It is set, also very specifically, on the first day of summer in 1961.

Parson and Lazar scrupulously avoided viewing the film itself, focusing on how to interpret the screenplay itself for the stage. This led to some challenging instances, Parson recalled. “There’s a part at the end, where one of the characters says this long piece of text which makes absolutely no sense. It turns out, when I finally did see the movie, it’s a song. And I didn’t know that. So I turned it into something completely different. So that’s the beauty of not knowing; it gave me the possibility of being trapped into finding my own solutions.”

Comme Toujours Here I Stand

Oct. 1-4, 7-10, The Kitchen, 512 W. 19 St. (betw. 10th & 11th Aves.), 212-255-5793; 8, \$15.