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CULTURE DESK

Notes on arts and entertainment.



“CAN YOU STARE AT ME FOR A LONG TIME?”

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Before the house opened at a recent performance of Adrienne Truscott’s “... Too Freedom ...,” at the Kitchen, Truscott—who is also one of the Kitchen’s house managers—made an announcement about the theatre’s rest rooms, on the second floor: if we wanted to use them during the show, we would not be able to take the elevator; flood damage from Hurricane Sandy had caused a wall to be torn down, and, without the wall, the elevator machinery would be too loud. At which point Truscott invited us into the theatre and asked us to make eye contact with her as she scanned our tickets.

Inside the theatre, the space had been stripped to its black walls. A small Genie cherry-picker was parked at the rear of the stage, and some two-by-fours and pieces of plywood and pegboard leaned against a wall. Downstage stood a small white table with a gray cloth over it, on which had been placed a teapot and a cup. A huge cone of fabric, in a vibrant abstract geometric patchwork of blue, gray, and yellow, hung from the ceiling at



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upstage left, looking like a giant wizard's hat. Right away, the mingling of utilitarian, pedestrian, and fantastical had our attention, and an antic atmosphere began to settle in. It was not unexpected: in addition to being a dancer and a choreographer, Truscott has experience in acrobatics and other circus-type activities, and is half of the irreverent two-woman "neo-vaudevillian" collaborative the Wau Wau Sisters. A traditional entertainment this would most likely not be.

When most of the audience was seated, Truscott, wearing black jeans, a black T-shirt, and boots, her hair pinned up, walked across the stage and then continued around the risers, circling us over and over, as we heard a recorded track of footfalls. Neal Medlyn, the show's sound designer (he's a Kitchen employee, too; he'd manned the box office earlier in the evening), walked on, climbed into the cherry-picker, and sent it up, stopping just shy of one of the two big squares high up on the back wall (later in the show, they lit up). "Here comes the big stuff!" he said, then unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a bare white shoulder and a patch of violet fabric.

A few times while this was going on, Laura Sheedy, another of the Kitchen's house managers, led latecomers into the theatre, and we watched them blink and stumble as they made their way up the stairs to their seats. Sheedy brought one couple to center stage, where she posed with them like big game she'd just bagged. They looked startled at first, but then seemed to enjoy being part of the show. A curious in-between state had taken hold, in which the boundary between pre-show and show was indistinct: the woman who took our tickets was now parading in front of us; the house lights were out but people were still arriving; the man at the box office was now staring out at us from his perch on a mechanical vehicle.

After a few passes, Truscott stopped in front of us and stripped to a shiny silver leotard-like garment with a complicated neckline and set off on her clomping circumnavigation again. Eventually, she abandoned the walking, and the boots, and began dancing; she had white headphones on, and even though she was aware of us, she was in her own world, tiptoeing back and forth, swinging her arms around. In time, she approached the audience, practically touching the people in the first row, crouching down and putting her face close to theirs, looking deeply into their eyes. She climbed the first few steps of the risers, then made her way down the second row, bumping into people along the way. It was amusing, but Truscott was dead serious.

"... Too Freedom ..." was a conglomeration of little deadpan dramas, usually overlapping. About fifteen minutes into the hour-long work, a crew of three men came on and matter-of-factly began building something with the wood while, on the other side of the stage, Sheedy sat at the table and began pouring tea from the pot into the cup. The cup never filled, and the teapot never emptied—an infinite stream of tea. Sheedy, with an expression of pleasant patience, kept tilting the teapot, occasionally looking over at the work crew. She also looked at us. At one point, she said, brightly, to a woman in the audience, "Can you stare at me for a long time?," a question that, more often than not, will cause someone to look away.



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There were other places to look: at the flimsy wall, about six feet high, that the crew was building; at Truscott, doing crazy grands battements at the back wall, skittering about the stage in her idiosyncratic way—self-involved and self-conscious at the same time; at Medlyn, still in the cherry-picker. The tea kept pouring. Suddenly, Medlyn called out, “To the latecomer!,” and began touching his abdomen, picking at it in agony, screeching and cursing in pain. He raised the cherry-picker’s basket up a few inches, which induced more yowling, then lowered it. Downstage, Truscott planted herself in a wide stance and windmilled her arms, then—delicately, even primly—spat a few times. It was almost sweet.

The Dadaist mood of the proceedings spread when someone brought out a roast chicken on a plate and placed it on the table. Medlyn and another woman, Gillian Walsh (who also works in the Kitchen’s box office), joined Sheedy there. The women took off their boots, and the three—very much a trio, dressed in grays and whites and the violet of their snap shirts, with big blue ruffles adorning their arms—began eating it with their hands, piling up the bones on a smaller plate. Occasionally, they spoke quietly to one another, but their main focus was the chicken, whose aroma wafted over to the audience.

The two trios were absorbed in their activities, the chicken getting smaller and the wall getting bigger. Perhaps the building project was an act of constructive defiance in the wake of the storm, an homage to the lost wall and to everything else that had been taken away. The juxtaposition of three young, white employees of a downtown performance space and three Latino men was poignant. Sheedy, Walsh, and Medlyn are all performers—they have creative lives outside of their day jobs. Should we value them more because they are artists, and we expect them to be onstage? The carpenters, though, actually made something tangible—was that not significant?

The faint sound of a guitar could be heard, and Medlyn got up from the table and began dancing nearby; Mickey Mahar (a Kitchen intern) took his place. Medlyn cycled through a series of angular shapes and subtle head movements, then stopped and said, enigmatically, “T . . . R.” Sheedy, Walsh, and Mahar got up from the table and went through the same choreography in unison, as the pretty guitar melody, louder now, played. Mahar, slender and boyish, broke out of the group and gamboled about, with circling leaps. The builders just watched. We watched them watch.

Back at the table, Walsh and Sheedy sat silently and pensively, till Walsh turned to Sheedy and said, “Can you not stare at me for a long time?” Sheedy complied, but glanced at her companion every now and then, each time seeming like a mini rebellion. The men were finishing their project: a U-shaped wall that cut us off spatially from the draped cone of fabric, a beautiful set that seemed to have no purpose except to draw our attention. But then it was whisked away to reveal a piano, with Medlyn seated at it, playing.

Truscott, who had reëmerged in a short gray frilly dress, went over to the wall, where a sheet of paper was attached. One of the carpenters, Jose Manosalvas, joined her there and the two began a conversation in Spanish, reading from the paper. Manosalvas told



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Truscott that they'd done everything she'd asked them to do, and she asked him if he could stare at her for a long time. He did, then said, "Can I leave now? I'm hungry, and you smell like chicken." Truscott asked him to do one more thing. She left the stage, and the other two carpenters, Adan Escalante Vazquez and Jose Carlos Villanueva, joined Manosalvas in a line. As Manosalvas gave directions, the men moved through simple gestures and poses, as the lights dimmed. The piano phrases that Medlyn had begun playing earlier continued, although he had left the stage some time earlier.

Throughout the evening, I had wanted to keep staring for a long time at the goings on. As we filed out of the theatre, Sheedy was topless and Truscott bottomless as they handed out programs. Medlyn and Walsh had taken up their positions behind the box-office desk. Neither had any clothes on. Mahar sat at a table with merchandise for sale. He was also naked. It was a lot of freedom, but not too much.

<http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/culture/2012/12/can-you-stare-at-me-for-a-long-time-adrienne-truscott-at-the-kitchen.html#ixzz2HdMSNfNR>