

The very basis of Antin's theater is lifeless, snide and (literally) manipulative.

CONCEPTS IN PERFORMANCE



Eleanor Antin (L) in "blackface" plays Eleanora Antinova as Marie Antoinette

The Squirming Point

Sally Banes

Eleanora Antinova
Before the Revolution
The Kitchen (Feb. 23-24)

I'm not sure how to write about Eleanor Antin's recent performance without making it sound better than it was. To describe the plot makes the "narrative" more intriguing — and more important as a component of the performance — than it is in reality. But with that caveat, let me begin.

Eleanora Antinova (played by Eleanor Antin) is a black woman, a ballerina who has been trained by Luba Tchernicheva and who dances with Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes. Frustrated by Diaghilev's refusal to let her play classic roles in the "white" ballets — *Swan Lake*, *Giselle*, *Les Sylphides* — Antinova decides to create her own ballet, about Marie Antoinette on the eve of the French Revolution. The rest of the "action" in *Before the Revolution* is that ballet, in which the starring

role is played by Antinova and the supporting roles by Diaghilev, Tamara Karsavina, Igor Stravinsky, Vaslav Nijinsky and Tchernicheva. Of course, they're not really played by all these dead people; they (and those people as themselves) are played by life-sized, painted cardboard cutouts on wheels, rolled about by a lackey in 18th-century dress (Tere Foley). Their lines are spoken by Antin, whose voice changes pitch and accent rather easily. These characters change roles by having clothing and wig cutouts clipped to them with clothespins, in the manner of paper dolls (Marie Antoinette even has two children clipped to her voluminous skirt).

The performance and the ballet within it surprised me with their conventional theatricality, even though I know that Antin has for years been interested in the creation of personae, which include, besides the Black Ballerina, the King of Solana Beach, the Nurse, and the Black Movie Star. The entire performance — with its arcane references to the actual world of Diaghilev (of course, there were no blacks in his company though there were Moors and Slaves in his ballets played by whites in blackface), its studiously constructed allusions to the court life of Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette, its arch artworld jokes — seems like an over-researched, double Stanislavsky etude, in which the actor builds the role by improvising myriad details of the character's life. Except for the lack of other actors, the situation is so traditional that its amateurish realization seems like a flaw rather than the endearing virtue one would hope for; its dullness — and the performance was boring — flows more from pretension than from post-modern aspirations. Antin's Russian accents were usually so good that it grated when her Nijinsky had an accent that sounded more Jewish than Polish. Her wobbly arabesques and attitudes were not quite adequate by real ballet standards (which, of course, they never claimed to emulate), but neither were they bad enough, or distanced enough, to serve as commentary on ballet. At one point, Antin speaks as Antin, explaining that the performance is an attempt to "fill in the space between me and my name with credit." The tactic remains just so much rhetoric, never providing a frame for the disparate images and messages in the rest of the performance.

Antin's working drawings for *Before the Revolution*, on display (with the cutouts) this month at Ronald Feldman's Fine Arts (74 St. and Madison Av.), show not only her amazing ability to copy other styles, but also, in the character studies, suggest a great deal of movement and vitality. I wonder why Antin chooses to leave these obvious aspects of dance offstage.

Not only does the role of the Black Ballerina, as Antin plays it, seem like a bad racist joke, and not only were many lines in the dialogue offensive in other ways (a Polish joke about Nijinsky, for example), but the very basis of Antin's theater is lifeless; snide, and (literally) manipulative. With Antin at the center, speaking all the roles, and getting all the attention, the structure of the performance denies anything or anyone outside Antin. It is a vehicle for absolute narcissism.