

# Text on the Loose

Annie-B Parson  
and Paul Lazar  
Reimagine the Page

BY DEBORAH JOWITT

In Big Dance Theater's production of Mac Wellman's playlet *Girl Gone*, evil is a misty thing with sharp little teeth. Three schoolgirls, Elyssa, Lisa, and Lissa, hiss and bubble and get glinty-eyed. As played by Cynthia Hopkins, Molly Hickock, and Stacy Dawson, directed by Paul Lazar, and set dancing by Annie-B Parson, they torment Buggins, the girl who knows all the answers in class (Kourtney Rutherford), reduce their teacher (Rebecca Wisocky) to tears, banter with an old love of Lissa's named Chaz Boiardo Guthrie (Tim Cummings), and cause a schoolfellow (Tymberly Canale) to disappear. They lure her into the woods with a sunflower, and nothing remains but her shoes filled with ashes. On some inscrutable level, the imaginary kingdom of Vadoo, which they make up, turns out to be real. By the end of the evening almost everyone's "disappeared."

Lazar and Parson (they're married) usually start with a play or a classic tale—not so much deconstructing it as re-inventing it via a rich visual structure. An example is their wonderful *A Simple Heart*, based on a spare, almost plotless Flaubert story, which played Dance Theater Workshop in 1997 and, revised, begins previews March 30 at Classic Stage Company. *Girl Gone* was something of a departure. Wellman wrote it for Big Dance Theater and attended rehearsals. His often dazzling wordplay—lofty and blunt, absurd and poignant—was a given, with movement illuminating continuity or providing subtext. For instance, during a deliriously brainy classroom recitation, Elyssa announces that "the sham of living a life within an age without being part of that age" is one of the seven bad things that constitute "the leftover contents of Pandora's box." Earlier in the scene, Buggins lifts the lid of her desk, and, to her delight, it glows inside—suggesting the pursuit of knowledge not only as a Pandora's box, but as an alternate reality. Wellman's play skews rationality ("I am a random pant-leg looking for the moon," sings Elyssa); in Parson's choreography, the three little witches cluster and slide apart as if they were aspects of a single demented dreamer.



Doing well by doing Wellman: Hickock and Dawson in *Girl Gone*

The couple's collaborative process is close; to say the least. "Many people attribute a lot of the physical imagery to me when Paul really did it," says Parson. "I'll even get big jobs based on stuff they loved that Paul did. And vice versa." When they've tackled plays, such as Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Bremen Freedom*, programs may list them as codirectors, or credit Lazar with direction and Parson with choreography; for *Girl Gone* she had the job of dreaming up dances inspired by Wellman's fanciful directions ("They do the Spinal Fusion. They do the Full Cleveland"). The pair's schedules and the nature of a given piece dictate the division of labor.

"Often Paul'll sort of dream up the whole piece, and I'll sculpt it," says Parson. Their 1997 production of Tristan Tzara's surreal *The Gas Heart* was his baby; Parson "came in and did the

If *Girl Gone* was a riot of language, *A Simple Heart* has few spoken words. Flaubert sentences, projected on the backdrop, precede each scene. It's as if Lazar and Parson wanted to create a subtle analogy to the largely silent days of the simple, devoted servant. The image devised for Mme. Aubain's little daughter is typical of the production's resonant succinctness. "I put her in a cradle," explains Parson, "because although she's a four- or five-year-old in the story, she dies very young. It's a distillation of character to say, 'This is a child.' That the adult performer, even curled up, doesn't fit properly into the small cradle gives the image the poignancy of discomfort.

Closing Classic Stage Company's season, Big Dance Theater follows two plays boasting high-profile performers: John Turturro in *Waiting for Godot*, Uma Thurman in Martin Crimp's adaptation of Molière's *The Misanthrope*. "So who's in your piece? Have we heard of anybody?" asked guests at the season's opening party. In a sense, dance is eternally fringe. But CSC, committed to "reimagining the classics," is admirably paired with Big Dance Theater, intent on discovering "what you can do onstage that you can't do on the page." Without violating that page. □

sound and some dances." She initiated the Flaubert project, and he wasn't a constant presence during rehearsals. The stunning opening may typify their teamwork. She thinks it may have been

Lazar's idea to have two women, both playing the maid Félicité, concealed under their mistress's hoopskirt, but it was her task (along with the performers) to figure out how they emerged. When Mme. Aubain rises to stroll, two hands walk ahead of her unseen feet, instantly signaling Félicité's status as patient drudge.