Miranda

Revue pluridisciplinaire du monde anglophone /
Multidisciplinary peer-reviewed journal on the English-speaking world

18 | 2019

Guerre en poésie, poésie en guerre

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Performance Review

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/18366>

DOI: 10.4000/miranda.18366

ISSN: 2108-6559

Publisher

Université Toulouse - Jean Jaurès

Electronic reference

Valentine Vasak, ““In this day and rage”: Albee’s Martha Avenged in Ferocious Feminist Rewriting”, *Miranda* [Online], 18 | 2019, Online since 17 April 2019, connection on 16 February 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/miranda/18366> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/miranda.18366>

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***Everyone's Fine with Virginia Woolf*: weblink to Elevator Repair Service webpage:**

- ¹ <https://www.elevator.org/shows/everyones-fine-with-virginia-woolf/>

Fig. 1

April Matthis as Honey, Annie McNamara as Martha in Elevator Repair Service's *Everyone's Fine With Virginia Woolf*

CREDITS: PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

Fig. 2

Vin Knight as George, Mike Iveson as Nick and Annie McNamara as Martha in Elevator Repair Service's *Everyone's Fine With Virginia Woolf*

CREDITS: PHOTO BY JOAN MARCUS

About the performance

- 2 *Everyone's Fine with Virginia Woolf* — Abrons Arts Center, New York. June 1-June 30 2018.
A play by Kate Scelsa for Elevator Repair Service
- 3 Directed by John Collins
- 4 With: Lindsay Hockaday, Mike Iveson, Vin Knight, April Matthis, Annie McNamara
Scenic Design: Louisa Thomson
- 5 Costume Design: Kaye Voyce
- 6 Lighting Design: Ryan Seelig
- 7 Sound Design: Ben Williams
- 8 Properties Design: Amanda Villalobos
- 9 Stage Manager: Maurina Lioce
- 10 Assistant Stage Manager: Elizabeth Emanuel
- 11 Production Manager: Liz Nielsen
- 12 Technical Director: Aaron Amodt
- 13 Director of Development: Marilyn Haines
- 14 Finance Manager: Lucy Mallett
- 15 Associate Producer: Lindsay Hockaday
- 16 Producer: Ariana Smart Truman

Review

- 17 More than a decade after the premiere of *Gatz*, their seven-hour long take on *The Great Gatsby*, New York based ensemble Elevator Repair Service digs at Edward Albee's iconic 1962 play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Catering to the learned theater buff, the play invites its audience to yield to the tangled web (or as Albee would say "wangled teb"¹) of intertextual allusions woven by playwright Kate Scelsa. Very aptly labeled "meta to the max" by *New York Times* critic² Ben Brantley, this spunky feminist variation on Albee's text unashamedly posits hyper-referentiality as a source of theatrical delight. In fact, in Elevator Repair Service's version, all characters are deeply engaged with literature: George now teaches the plays of Tennessee Williams and willfully indulges in late-night bombastic renditions of famous monologues delivered to a reluctant audience. Vin Knight's histrionics and extravagant Southern Belle accent come through as both tribute to and parody of the masterpieces of American drama. As for Nick (Mike Iveson), besides teaching, his not-so-secret hobby consists in writing mpreg (male pregnancy) slash fiction about the *Twilight* saga, fantasizing carrying the child of a vampire. This combination of highbrow and lowbrow culture, American drama 101 syllabus material and pop culture werewolf romances, very pointedly challenges our cultural hierarchies. Whereas the play is laden with references to the "triumvirate who dominated the post-war American theater"³—Albee, Miller and Williams—the hints are most of the time parodic. As the performance unfolds, it appears that the textual material of some of the most famous monologues of American drama is merely a canvas, opening up to a multiplicity of interpretative fancies, preferably reversing the gender usually assigned to the roles in order to expose the artificiality of gender

conventions. It comes as no surprise then that in this self-referential, metafictional theatrical moment, there is no room for a conventional plot: whereas secrecy played a major part in Albee's play, Scelsa's rewriting opens on Martha's assertion that she has revealed all of her couple's secrets to Nick and Honey during the faculty party to just get them out of the way. The tension inherent to Albee's play is thus immediately deflated. By revealing key elements of the plot seconds into the performance, the playwright takes it for granted that the spectator is acquainted with the specifics of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, if not, she's in for a few spoilers. If this constant play on intertextuality sometimes verges on didactic text analysis, Elevator Repair Service's performance draws the audience's attention to the ways in which interpersonal relationships are mediated by cultural representations. Just like the characters onstage, we spectators are beings woven out of literary fabric.

- 18 However, the citational quality of the play does not simply waver between tribute and mockery, it serves a political agenda. Indeed, the production does not merely approach the pantheon of American letters with a mixture of esteem and sass, it is teeming with feminist anger. In a conversation with director John Collins published in the performance program, playwright Kate Scelsa expresses her will to challenge our (mis)representations of female rage: "I've always been very interested in whether or not embodying that kind of female rage could be seen as sympathetic. Even powerful. Or if those women just become the shrew. Which means their rage can be dismissed". Besides, at the end of the interview, Scelsa lays out plainly her motivation for challenging Albee's play: "Martha must be avenged". As the performance unfolds, the need to reevaluate the way female anger is staged by male creators becomes more urgent. At the end of the play, the suburban living room setting disappears, it is replaced by a couch placed in the center of a bare stage. A female PhD student/vampire who "feeds on neuroses" is sitting in majesty. Describing the setting as a Purgatory, she reproaches George for "Painting a willful middle-aged woman who likes to have fun as a shrewish monster".
- 19 However timeless this reenactment of Judgment Day may seem, the play is adamantly rooted in its socio-historical context and reveals itself as topical and aiming for ultra-contemporaneity. Scelsa's project to put irate feminists in the limelight definitely captures the zeitgeist of a post-Weinstein America. "In this day and rage" (to quote from the vampire), Martha must be avenged and the political value of her wrath must be acknowledged. This celebration of feminist fury is often conveyed with humor: when during casual conversation with George Nick drops a reference to *Annie Hall*, the former walks away from him in complete terror, knowing as he does that Martha will not tolerate a mention of Woody Allen in her house. In fact, when Annie McNamara reenters the stage, she claims with flaring nostrils that she can smell that someone made a reference to the abhorrent director. To dispel the foulness of the utterance and purify the house, she proceeds to performing a sage-burning ritual in the living room. The question raised by this ritual and by the play at large could be the following: is the American stage a safe space for women? Ironically, when the men chat in the living room, Martha and Honey withdraw to the kitchen where Martha attempts to strike a friendship with Honey, or as Honey views it, to engage in "Bechdel banter"⁴. Yet, later in the play, Honey, trapped in her shallow characterization, exits the room, hoping to find protagonist status offstage. Whereas Martha's powerful godlike figure belongs centerstage, Honey's more subdued character leaves in search of a play (or a room) of

her own. Needless to say, this elaborately playful and vindictive staging of gender politics also makes a dent into preconceptions about masculinity. To that respect, *Everyone's Fine With Virginia Woolf* clearly identifies George and Nick as (more or less) closeted homosexuals. Albee's equivocal homosocial small talk between Harry and George has given way to genderbending acts as well as the open disclosing of not-so-hidden homosexual fantasies so that if there ever was gayness in Albee's work it is now fully out. According to one negative review of the performance⁵, under the guise of celebrating feminist values, this caricature of gayness verges on homophobia. Whether we view the play's insistence upon gayness as celebratory or whether we wince at it, Elevator Repair Service's project to both expose and confront Albee's gender politics is definitely successful; *Everyone's Fine With Virginia Woolf* appears as a valuable attempt to update and reassess the way Broadway roles constrain and limit our definitions of gender roles.

- 20 Indeed, as the evening unfolds, it gradually becomes clear that this reconfiguration of gender roles and relationships is part of a larger strategy of global destabilization. The New York theatre goer is introduced to the culturally familiar environment of the New Carthage living room only better to be unsettled in her expectations. To that respect, the radical reshuffling of familiar landmarks is one of the main tenets of the play. Elevator Repair Service's comedy cheerfully embraces the precariousness of our modern existences and delights in the chaos that occurs when preconceptions are deconstructed. It first targets economic precariousness: Nick's obsequious attitude and his erratic behavior result from his eagerness to get tenure, as if the lack of consistency of his character was nothing but the consequence of an unfavorable professional balance of power. But this instability takes on larger metaphysical proportions. The set designed by Louisa Thomson exemplifies the overwhelming loss of bearings introduced by the performance: reminiscent of many Broadway living room sets, her decor lays bare its artificiality and flatness through the resort to a painted backdrop. Besides, its frail-looking wooden frame immediately strikes us as fake and reflects a deep-rooted sense of instability. This lack of authenticity is fully exposed when Honey and Nick enter: Martha takes their coat and tries to hang them to the painted coat rack. Of course, it is nothing but an illustration on a completely flat backdrop and the coats limply collapse to the floor. This element of visual comedy reminds us that in this phony setting, there is no actual source of certainty that one may cling to—or hang to for that matter. Could this overwhelming falsity be the reason why all the plants that Martha tries to grow wilt and die? Is there room for organic survival in such a hostile environment? In any case, there is no way out of this nightmarish "post-irony suburban nightmare" as Honey terms it, since whoever exits the room ends up in the garage and can do nothing but wait for his or her cue to reenter the stage. In the end, actors and spectators alike seem to be trapped in the same claustrophobic unreliable environment, where everything rings hollow. In the last act of the play, the whole set is swept aside, dissolved into nothingness, but the Purgatory-couch shrouded in artificial smoke that replaces it offers no comfort whatsoever. Even more disconcerting is the final entrance of a robot, yet another citational reference (to Rich Maxwell's play *Joe*) that perfects the complete blurring of landmarks that the audience has been experiencing for 75 minutes. This hyper-referential patchwork esthetics, combining gritty humor and existential angst is both a jibe at and acknowledgment of our difficult quest for familiarity and reliability. The overpowering sense of instability that lingers after the curtain call seems to suggest that as helpless creatures lost in a maze of

cultural signs, struggling to make sense of the referential prodigality, we'd better laugh about it all. If, besides the clarity of its endorsement of Martha's feminist rage, *Everyone's Fine With Virginia Woolf* baffles us with its undecidability it is most certainly because, as Martha very aptly articulates it "ambiguous times call for ambiguous narratives".

NOTES

1. In Edward Albee's *The Play About the Baby* first performed in 1998, the girl exclaims "'Oh what a wangled teb we weave" (491). The play is reproduced in *The Collected Plays of Edward Albee. Volume 3:1978-2003*, New York: Overlook Duckworth, 2006.
 2. The review published by Ben Brantley on June 12 2018 is available online : <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/12/theater/everyones-fine-with-virginia-woolf-review.html>
 3. The phrase was used by Christopher W. E. Bigsby in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama: Volume 2*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1984. (4)
 4. In the script of the play, Scelsa provides a footnote explaining this reference : " 'Bechdel banter' – referring to the 'Bechdel Test,' named after cartoonist Alison Bechdel, in which something is said to 'pass the Bechdel Test' if it contains a scene of two female characters talking about something other than a man."
 5. See for example David Barbour's review on the website "Lighting and Sound in America": <http://www.lightingandsoundamerica.com/news/story.asp?ID=FE2XAM>
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ABSTRACTS

Performance Review of *Everyone's Fine with Virginia Woolf* by Kate Scelsa for Elevator Repair Service at the Abrons Arts Center (New York). June 1–June 30 2018.

Compte-rendu de la pièce *Everyone's Fine with Virginia Woolf* de Kate Scelsa par Elevator Repair Service au Abrons Arts Center (New York). Représentations : du 1^{er} au 31 juin 2018.

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Mots-clés: théâtre américain, Kate Scelsa, Elevator Repair Service, réécriture méta-théâtrale, parodie, féminisme, monde universitaire, fiction slash

Subjects: Theater

Keywords: American Theatre, Kate Scelsa, Edward Albee, Elevator Repair Service, metatheatrical rewriting, parody, feminism, academia, slash fiction

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