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Photo: Blaine Davis

Absent of Clothing and Title, A Revelation

by R. Eric Thomas

A caveat:

I find on-stage nudity discomfiting. When a performer disrobes mere feet from me I get nervous and self-conscious. I imagine said performer's genitalia—no matter what type of genitalia there may be—is screaming at me: "I dare you to not be aroused! I challenge you to say this is blasé! I dare you to stare! These are PRIVATE PARTS!" I expect to be bullied by nude bodies, especially when saddled with the ponderous distinction "feminist nudity". (That's not a thing. I know.) (Or is it? I don't know.) I'm relieved to report that though *Untitled Feminist Show*, presented by Young Jean Lee's Theater Company as part of the Live Arts Festival, is ferocious, preening, confident, loud and exhausting, it is not interested or invested in my discomfort. It didn't come here to fight. As it turns out, it's an embrace; a big, naked group hug. But, I'm getting ahead of myself. And I'm getting in the way.

A clarification:

One is tempted to talk about Young Jean Lee's wordless, musical romp featuring six naked performers in terms of what it isn't or what it avoids. One might try to draw inferences from a perceived narrative, to assign characters or tropes. The magic in the experience of this production, however, is derived from receiving what it is and discussing what it does. In a flat blank space, framed by black curtains on either side and a glowing white rectangular box above, Lee sets loose a galaxy of scenarios and ideas. They come piling one on top of the other; simple poses become balletic movement interludes which then turn into awkward vaudevillian gestures which give way to erotic pantomimes. What is it about? Everything. Does that make it feminist? Absolutely.

Lee, in collaboration with Morgan Gould and choreographer Faye Driscoll, has assembled a company of accomplished performers from such disciplines as varied as burlesque, cabaret, and modern dance who share a stunning ability to combine showmanship and authenticity. Only one is a trained dancer, but the movement phrases are simple leaps, extensions and steps. Each body has a vagina and breasts, though not all performers identify as female. Each body varies in shape and size and color, though—thankfully—there isn't

the sort of “one from each category” synthetic diversity of a Bennetton ad. Each body is naked throughout the entire performance, though it’s rarely commented on and not sensationalized.

At the start of the *Untitled Feminist Show*, each performer—Becca Blackwell, Katy Pyle, Regina Rocke, Jen Rosenblit, Amelia Zirin-Brown (aka the cabaret fixture Lady Rizo), and Cynthia Hopkins—enter through the audience, making very deliberate eye contact. They exhale in unison with each footfall, as if to cleanse the space of assumptions and tension. Once on the stage—lusciously lit by Raquel Davis—they present a series of symmetrical poses reminiscent of a painting on a Grecian urn. A low rumble from the speakers gives way to classical music—Chris Giarmo and Jamie McElhinney are credited with sound design, which ranges from complex white noise mixes to lyric-less pop standards.

The piece is made up of a series of vignettes that bleed into each other. A cute fairy tale ballet featuring a crafty witch and a trio of damsels in distress leads into a hip-hop dance in which each performer pantomimes stereotypical “women’s duties”—cooking, cleaning, child-rearing. These are arguably the most politically tinged vignettes, and while they’re enjoyable and quite funny, it’s clear that Lee and company have loftier ambitions. Frankly, these performers are too self-possessed to be bothered archly mimicking princesses or feminine archetypes. As the hip-hop housewife routine breaks apart, the piece blooms.

Indeed, at one point in my notes I stopped trying to record the vibrant frolicking or trying to connect it to a larger political meaning and simply wrote “FACE. Yessssssss! FACE!” From fierce to fearful, they were serving it. And it’s in their immensely expressive faces that the performers carry the heart of *Untitled Feminist Show*. They’re not bodies with a message written across them; they are people sharing a space and an experience and letting us in. It’s a powerful distinction.

In a wordless but strong-voiced evening of mesmerizing visuals, it’s unfair to single out individual moments, so, without qualification, a note on a particular startling vignette: after a lush pas de deux with Rocke, Pyle burst into a fit of giggles, spreading it to the group. The giggles and shakes multiplied physically, until each performer was writhing and gyrating into and out of a series of group poses highlighting points of contact. At the peak of kinetic excitement, Rosenblit broke off into a completely gonzo solo that consisted largely of head-banging and charging about the stage. She was part-pro wrestler, part-heavy metal rocker: a red-faced, flailing force of nature. As squealing guitars rose to deafening levels she leapt into the audience like a banshee. Rosenblit attacked audience members on the front row, throwing her hair in faces, shaking one man brusquely, charging up the aisle and back. The man two seats down from me was laughing uncontrollably; the woman next to me was cheering; I was gasping. Every reaction was right.

Untitled Feminist Show, Young Jean Lee’s Theater Company, September 19-21 at 9 p.m., Suzanne Roberts Theater.

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September 21, 2012