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'Opheliamachine' Takes on Influential 20th-Century Theatre Work

Jessica Rizzo · Thursday, June 13th, 2013

Like Shakespeare, Heiner Müller was never terribly interested in what Ophelia had to say. In 1979 Müller, the (formerly East) German playwright and director who would inherit artistic directorship of Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, composed *Hamletmachine*, a jagged assemblage of language planes, an adaptation less than ten pages in length, but so dense and so open to extreme directorial intervention that productions of the piece running up to twelve hours have been staged all over the world.

Müller's text, thickly braided with allusions to German intellectual history, gives us a Nietzschean Hamlet, a Dionysian Hamlet. In *The Birth of Tragedy* Nietzsche writes:

In this sense the Dionysian man resembles Hamlet: both have once looked truly into the essence of things, they have gained knowledge, and nausea inhibits action; for their action could not change anything in the eternal nature of things; they feel it to be ridiculous or humiliating that they should be asked to set right a world that is out of joint. Knowledge kills action; action requires the veils of illusion: that is the doctrine of Hamlet.

The rest of the play Müller devotes to ripping away those "veils of illusion" which have made radical political action possible in the twentieth century. Evincing now-ubiquitous postmodern nostalgia for the the so-called "grand narratives" of history promising, say, religious redemption or proletarian emancipation, the play depicts a world descending into chaos as technologism and terrorism begin to fill the void. In the final image of *Hamletmachine* Ophelia, allying herself with the victims of history, the subaltern of the "third world," the feminine, any and all "others," identifies herself as Electra, and leaves us with a baleful warning:

"I expel all the semen which I have received. I transform the milk of my breasts into deadly poison. I suffocate the world which I gave birth to, between my thighs. I bury it in my crotch. Down with the joy of submission. Long live hate, loathing, rebellion, death. When she walks through your bedroom with butcher's knives, you'll know the truth."

Ophelia's explosive rage is the photonegative of Hamlet's paralyzing nausea, his apathy and ennui. Her vision for the future of human existence is simple: cosmic annihilation. This is how she responds to centuries of oppression. For her, there is nothing left of this man-made, male dominated, and now man-despoiled world worth saving.

Thirty-four years and several waves of feminism later, Magda Romanska's Ophelia offers a rather

more complex response to the marginalization of “the feminine” in history and the specular positioning of female characters vis-a-vis the male protagonists of literary history. This Ophelia is herself a writer. She casts a thoroughly jaundiced eye on heterosexual relationships, but paradoxically tries to present herself as a woman capable of desiring and being desired. She oscillates between cool distance, total inthrallment, and yes, rage. She has exceptional perspective on her situation and is often exquisitely poised, quoting Plato on pleasure and pain while Hamlet vegetates in front of the television. Elsewhere, she joins Hamlet in couples therapy, or appears as a vulnerable young woman followed by a foully purposed Hamlet through Port Authority at two o’clock in the morning. Elsewhere we see her in a wheelchair, a repurposing of Müller’s that gestures towards the nascent contemporary awareness that “disability,” is, like class, race, and gender, a category much in need of deconstructing. Sometimes she and Hamlet become difficult to distinguish from one another, as in one of the play’s many “impossible” stage directions where Hamlet’s face “slowly morphs into Ophelia’s face. She is wearing an army helmet, which she covers in a black headscarf.”

Romanska gives us an unsettling and internally conflicted picture of global gender relations taking into account, as Müller did not, the diverse and occasionally mutually exclusive needs that feminism (or any revolution) must attempt to satisfy. Müller brings us to the brink, then charges the victims with the responsibility for remaking an inhabitable world in their own image. Romanska’s play interrogates the premise of this assumed responsibility, even as it takes absolutely seriously the imperative to imagine a way to get beyond the aridity of exhausted white, bourgeois, male, heterosexual narratives.

“Hamlet, my darling,” Romanska’s Ophelia begins, “I do not wish to identify with you or with her.” As traditional masculinity and femininity are both models constructed by men (if also policed by women complicit in their own oppression), Ophelia finds she must write herself into history if she wants to be truly represented. Her revolution is first a revolution in language, and in this sense Romanska owes more to that tradition of astringently feminist, linguistically challenging playwriting which includes Sarah Kane and Elfriede Jelinek than she owes to Müller. In the UK and Austria, respectively, Kane and Jelinek have each explored the ways in which, as women embedded in the calcified permaculture of our fatalistically post and pre-modern moment, the only meaningful act of creation may be one of negation.

A worthy heir to this legacy, Romanska carves out a space of critical resistance in *Opheliamachine,* a space where the ugliest and the most beautiful of our desires can exist, as they do in life, side by side, where the death-dealing and life-giving vie for dominance. At long last Ophelia speaks, but she has many voices. If we can begin coming to terms with this kind of complexity, with this cognizance of human finitude, with the presence of death in life, Romanska seems to suggest, we may find it possible to begin remaking our broken world even though we do so this time without any “image” to be our guide.

‘Opheliamachine’ will have its world premiere at the City Garage Theatre in Los Angeles on June 14, 2013. Information here: http://www.citygarage.org/opheliamachine.html

Image: ‘Opheliamachine’ photo by Paul Rubenstein.

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