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Review of: Sweet Dreams by Diane Esguerra staged by Sphinx Theatre Company and Some Explicit Polaroids by Mark Ravenhill staged by Out of Joint

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Some Explicit Polaroids by Mark Ravenhill; Sweet Dreams by Diane Esguerra

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their physiques was reinforced by their symmetrical choreography, which rendered their shadows virtually identical and synchronized in motion. While their bodies dangled as flesh matter in endless minute contortions, their shadows emerged independently like a pair of phantom amoebas, contracting or relaxing under the microscopic light.

The second act proceeded as an alien tango with the ground, evoking images of earth-bound insects. The duo, with their backs toward us, descended into a pool of red light. Keeping their faces averted and legs bent, their backs became canvases for muscular forms. They extended their spines and lay prostrate, allowing their flesh to rub and crawl on the hard surface. They were able to transform their anatomies to such a degree that their movements often appeared directionless—an optical illusion aided by their hairless and elongated bare bodies. From a distance, it was hard to tell whether they were bending forward or backward to walk on all fours. While the duo adopted symmetry to produce doubling between them, their kinetic art followed a linear structure to create a flow of metamorphosis: their torsos and limbs mutated in progressive variations without cyclical repetition. The couple's gestures were both rhythmic and jerky, attenuated and proficient, volatile and rigorous, presenting configurations so difficult and outlandish that they seldom looked human. Then, abruptly, they ended the state of constant motion to become ossified specimens, like aliens poisoned by humans.

The music stopped as two men in plain clothes approached the pair. They moved Steger from the dry concrete to the shallow water about fifteen feet away. They returned to move Sim to the water. Some audience members gasped in disbelief; others ran quickly to the scene. Pushed by the two men, the frozen bodies started rolling slowly on their own toward deeper water. Before most spectators registered what was happening, the performers dropped into the central current and their twin figures were instantly carried away by the rapids. A breathtaking exit closed the culminating act of *THEM*.

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SOME EXPLICIT POLAROIDS. By Mark Ravenhill. *Out of Joint*, New Ambassador's Theatre, London. 26 October 1999.

SWEET DREAMS. By Diane Esguerra. Sphinx Theatre Company, Chelsea Arts Centre, London. 28 October 1999.

Supposedly, socialism and feminism have been discredited in late twentieth-century Britain. Between the recent crop of "lad's plays" noted by critics and feminists alike and the tendency of current theatre practitioners to reject the techniques of 1970s-era political theatre, feminism and socialism seem the least popular of stage subjects. Yet at the end of the decade, Mark Ravenhill's *Some Explicit Polaroids* and Diane Esguerra's *Sweet Dreams* returned both issues to the stage with a certain millennial insistence. *Sweet Dreams* was commissioned and staged by Sphinx Theatre Company, the 1990s incarnation of feminist theatre pioneer the Women's Theatre Group. *Polaroids* was produced by *Out of Joint* under Max Stafford-Clark, whose direction of the seminal socialist theatre company Joint Stock is heralded in the name of his new company. The provoking, passionate productions of these new plays put socialist and feminist issues back on the boards with a savvy theatricality.

Like so many pieces of feminist theatre before it, *Sweet Dreams* restages that crucible of feminist critique: Sigmund Freud's failed treatment of Ida Bauer, the girl he immortalized as the hysterical Dora in his case study. In the post-show discussion I attended, Sphinx Artistic Director Sue Parrish said she commissioned the text because she was fascinated by Dora and has always viewed her as "a kind of female Hamlet: someone who has trouble being heard, has trouble with the past, is haunted." Unlike Helene Cixous's aggressively deconstructive *Portrait of Dora*, which dislocates language and multiplies characters into a hysterical iteration of images and actions, *Sweet Dreams* creates more solid characters and sequences. In fact, Esguerra's starting point is the "real" person Ida Bauer, who is often lost to history in the fame of her alter-ego Dora. Nevertheless, Esguerra's play still works by fragments, because almost nothing is known about the real Ida except the records of her treatment, her marriage, and her death. Esguerra knows that what makes the real Ida's case powerful is precisely its unfinished nature. Her cocaine-sniffing Freud can barely believe that Dora/Ida rejects him and leaves his analysis incomplete. In performance, the doubling of the wickedly sharp actor Jonathan Oliver as both Freud and Herr K amplified this confusion on the part of male figures at the

female's refusal to participate in their male narratives of love or recovery.

At the center of the play, Esguerra's Dora/Ida, played by Sophie Walker with a compelling and self-centered charisma, remained inscrutable, a mystery who seemed aware of her historic/hysterical dimensions. At moments Walker created a sincere child of an Ida, a girl on the cusp of puberty who had territory battles with her mother, idealized her father, and expressed genuine relief when Freud assured her that he in fact believed her story about Herr K's attempted seduction. At other times, Walker's Ida exhibited a self-presence that defeated all attempts to explain her still-potent mystery, as in one surreal scene where she turned the tables and analyzed the images in Freud's dreams. Sphinx's production used this scene to highlight the struggle between the real Ida and the words Freud used to represent her.

The staging of *Sweet Dreams* literally reflected this play of representation. The main set piece of Annabel Lee's design was a wall of horizontal rotating mirror panels, which spun to reflect the red and green carpet and furniture. The effect reproduced the images of the characters behind the bodies of the actors, as if the characters were suspended in the recollections, dreams, and projections poured out in Freud's office. In counterpoint, on the stage left wall a Munch-inspired line drawing of an emaciated woman whose eyes and lips were erased figured Ida-as-Dora, a woman whose corporeal perceptions and speech are stymied by her interaction with Freud.

Sphinx's telling of the story reinvested Ida with her voice, which was both an artistic and political move. The show began with a tape of an old woman's voice repeating "one hundred years" in a mystical incantation that insisted the twentieth century has been defined and shaped from beginning to end by Freud's theories. The voice then unfolded into Ida Bauer's introduction of herself, presenting the few scant facts known about her. Bringing things full circle, the play ended with a voice-over that found significant parallels between the way Ida and Freud's lives ended: both prosperous Jews, each left Germany as a refugee during World War II. Displaced and isolated, both died from cancer. The voice-over set *Sweet Dreams* up as a kind of recovered memory play, and it was staged with nostalgia and elegance. But the production's emphasis on Ida's voice challenged the dogmatic assumption of her abuse at Freud's hands. Sphinx's Ida had the last laugh—she was the one who left. She was Freud's match, not his victim. The position Sphinx inhabited with this

choice is slyly feminist: uninterested in radical or polemical stances, Parrish and her company proposed that perhaps Ida should not be a symbol of women's suffering, but of their power to set terms.

Some Explicit Polaroids approached socialism much like *Sweet Dreams* approached feminism: from the side, wary of sacrificing its theatrical effect to overt political discussion. Yet *Polaroids* is a play that would be completely incomprehensible without a previous understanding of how Thatcherism changed British assumptions about society and the role of theatre in it. The play is Ravenhill's follow-up to the violently successful *Shopping and Fucking*, a brutal play that follows a group of drug-ravaged young Londoners trying to redeem their trashed humanity, the production of which established Out of Joint as Britain's hottest touring company. Trash is again Ravenhill's leading metaphor in *Polaroids*. "Trash music, trash food, trash people" is the rallying cry. Benedict Nightingale calls the type of theatre exemplified by Ravenhill, Jeb Butterworth, and the late Sarah Kane—whose plays *Mojo* and *Blasted* bear clear resemblance to Ravenhill's—the "theatre of urban ennui." The whole genre reflects the confusion and exhaustion of a young generation who were told there was no such thing as "society," just a group of individuals looking out for number one. In this world, both human kindness and socialism are the ridiculed dreams of an older generation manifestly defeated by history.

The difference in *Some Explicit Polaroids*, however, is that at the center of Ravenhill's ensemble are two people of that older generation, whose struggles in the current social and political landscape are intertwined with the struggles of the drugged and disillusioned younger characters. Nick and Helen are former "class warrior soul-mates," but the play begins when a recently-released-from-jail Nick shows up on Helen's doorstep and discovers a suited, bespectacled woman on the local council who is nursing thoughts of becoming an MP. Nick was in jail for kidnapping and torturing a business owner who fired Helen's father. Helen refuses to put Nick up, but they have unfinished business. One of the striking things about Ravenhill's dramaturgy is that he writes about groups of people as his protagonists instead of placing a single (male) character center stage, which is the norm for a writer so generally embraced by mainstream theatres and critics. Nick and Helen's story intersects and overlaps with that of Nadia, Tim, and Victor. Nadia is a positive-thinking stripper with an abusive boyfriend; Tim has AIDS and insists that nothing "means" anything; Victor is a Russian go-go dancer who wants to be "owned" by Tim. To complicate matters, Jonathan, Nick's vic-

tim, makes a reappearance. Ironically, he seems to be the only character capable of doing any larger good. He uses his capitalist excess to fund the building of schools, hospitals, and the occasional "festival of new plays."

In performance, Ravenhill's bitter humor and driving astonishment at the state of the nation was mirrored in the intense performances delivered by Nick Dunning as Nick and Russell Barr as Tim. As Nadia and Victor, Fritha Goodey and Matthew Waite created terrifyingly smooth surfaces for characters constitutionally incapable of confronting their pain. Sally Rogers's Helen and David Sibley's Jonathan were the most textured portrayals, fascinating because they rarely gave into the rage or denial of the others. Julian McGowan's set provided the most antiseptic of carpet-covered interiors for the action. The space worked best as the hospital room where Victor and Tim have their final, sordid rapprochement. That any comfortable furnishings or personal belongings only appeared on a video screen backdrop underlined, like Johanna Town's clinical lighting, the cool and technological isolation of modern life. Max Stafford-Clark's direction kept the play moving at a furious pace, as if to convince the audience that the play was relentlessly hip in spite of its reconsideration of the need for human connection and fair provision of social resources. As a whole, the unflinching production strove to make emotional and cultural degradation the true profanity of a play riddled with foul language and fouler acts. Like the characters of *Polaroids*, *Out of Joint* is finding a way to talk about changing the world without being branded as relics of a past era.

Some Explicit Polaroids is not as generous or subtle a piece of work as *Sweet Dreams*; it trades exertion and anger for sophistication and contemplation. But the two plays engage a discussion of socialism and feminism on stage in unexpectedly hopeful and lucidly artistic ways, which is the rightful heritage of two companies descended from WTG and Joint Stock. *Sphinx* and *Out of Joint* are coming to terms with the past and hoping for the future at the end of the century.

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A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM. By William Shakespeare. Chicago Shakespeare Theater, Chicago, Illinois. 5 March 2000.

In 1986, Barbara Gaines founded the Shakespeare Repertory in Chicago, and over the course of several years developed a reputation for sound productions. In October of 1999, the company changed its name to the Chicago Shakespeare Theater as it moved into a new home on Navy Pier, a \$23-million complex housing a 525-seat courtyard theatre modeled on the Royal Shakespeare Company's Swan Theatre in Stratford-upon-Avon and a smaller, 200-seat studio theatre. Both are excellent spaces, superbly designed. That Navy Pier is an amusement-park site may have some effect on the productions there, encouraging a trend to popularization.

Joe Dowling, a native of Ireland and former director of Dublin's famed Abbey Theatre, has been the artistic director of the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis since 1995. He has made a specialty of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and although I have not seen them all, I did see the touring production mounted by The Acting Company from Juilliard in Dayton in 1991 and his Stratford Festival production of 1993. In January of 2000 he opened his most recent production of Shakespeare's comedy for a sold-out run in the inaugural season of the Chicago Shakespeare Theater (CST). This production emphasized the magical elements of the play.

Despite the popularity of the CST *Dream*, critical response was mixed. One Chicago reviewer doubted "that there has ever been a happier, more romantic or more hilarious staging" of the play, while another damned it as a "big, bloated bore." Both responses are justified. For all its strengths, the production's faults seemed to be the result of an unlimited budget. It emphasized the campiness of the musical scenes, and perhaps overemphasized the visual aspects, especially the ingenuity of the set.

Darling's *Dreams* are always sexy. The press release said the production was inspired by the paintings of Hieronymus Bosch, but if so, Bosch was inspired by one of Georgia O'Keefe's vagina-like flowers. For the forest scenes, a "fantastical motorized 18-foot-tall by 24-foot-wide electric blue flower" rolled out and disgorged the first fairy and Puck to rock and roll music. The production opened with an apparently naked Puck romping through the audience until he was summoned onstage and dressed. Oberon was feathered and shelled, like a turtle, with a big codpiece. The four young lovers were reduced to their underwear (their outer garments flew off them magically) within minutes of