

2006

## Review of Buffard's Mauvais Genre

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### Repository Citation

Jaclyn Pryor. Review of Mauvais Genre (Choreographed by Alain Buffard / PI:ES. Produced with the French-US Exchange in Dance (FUSED). Dancespace Project, St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, New York City. 30 March 2006). *Theatre Journal* 58.3 (2006) 483-485.

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to the labored breathing of the reaches to the sky, live and recorded sound illuminates the intensity of the struggles occurring within the physical action. In the final segment of the production, for example, accompanying some of the most explicitly rigorous of the men's movements, we hear Barbra Streisand singing "In Trutina." The effect is mesmerizing. The men, clad only in bikini briefs, every muscle in their bodies revealed, articulated, and engaged, their movements anything but romantic and lyrical, interact with the supple sounds of Streisand, an icon of popular culture. All at once, the juxtaposition of the visual and the aural thrusts the audience into a new landscape, where the predictable becomes unexpected and spontaneous.

The curtain call evokes a similar power. All four men walk slowly downstage, reaching and extending upward while they scream in silence. The music is John Lennon's "Woman": romantic, playful, uplifting. Again, the combination is remarkable. The visual world seems apocalyptic, reminding us of butoh's origin as a response to a postwar Japan, while the aural scenery forces us to confront our own sentimentality and desires for fun and humor and love.

Murobushi pushes the boundaries of dance and theatre with *Handsome Blue Sky*. Exploring stillness and silence, he inspires growth and transformation not only in the performers, but also within the members of his audience. I could feel myself change: my sense of time, my expectations for action, even my own breathing. I was asked to sit with uncertainty and struggle, to fill in the silence with thought and emotion, to explore my own internal comfort and occasional discomfort at the extremity of the physical world presented to me. The sounds of breath allowed me to connect with the actors in the most intimate and visceral ways: I could experience each breath with them, because I was encouraged to listen. Japan Society is fortunate to have sponsored such a significant piece of butoh performance.

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**MAUVAIS GENRE.** Choreographed by Alain Buffard / PI:ES. Produced with the French-US Exchange in Dance (FUSED). Dancespace Project, St. Mark's Church-in-the-Bowery, New York City. 30 March 2006.

Created by French choreographer Alain Buffard, *Mauvais Genre* (Bad Type) presents itself as "a work of art about the fragility and vulnerability of the body." The body in question is multivalent: the



After swaddling themselves in layers of underwear, performers find momentary stillness on the floor in *Mauvais Genre*.

Photo: Marc Damage.

HIV+ body (such as is Buffard's), the male body, the female body, the white body, the black body, the brown body, the naked body, the performing body, and, of course, the body of spectators to the work. A sequel to Buffard's 1998 solo, *Good Boy*, there is something eerie, captivating, irresistible, impossible, and, above all, transporting, about this postmodern dance. After the show, I found myself stumbling through the East Village streets "distracted" and "absorbed"—in the Benjaminian sense of the words—as if the person who had entered St. Mark's Church at 8:30 had been "exchanged" for another somewhere in the hour-long experience of witnessing. I didn't become more French, but I did become more human.

The space of St. Mark's is as much a character in *Mauvais Genre* as the thirteen dancers who compose its ensemble. The primary playing area is a large hardwood floor, surrounded on three sides with wide, tiered steps covered with grey carpeting. With several rows of audience chairs on the steps, and square, cushioned mats near the aisles and toward the front of the house, the architecture seems vaguely reminiscent of a noh theatre, one with, perhaps, a hint of Bauhaus modernism.

Two parallel rows dotted with square towers composed of small, thin, cardboard boxes, stacked up like a game of Jenga, line the sides of the stage, where carpet meets floor. Each box bears the name "Retrovir 300mg." Upstage, thirteen clusters of fluorescent light bulbs hang in a row—three long white tubes dangling vertically in each cluster—hovering about six feet above the ground. Beneath each, a black garbage bag, bulging with expectation, rests on the floor.

Without the usual theatrical warning, a performer enters and stands beneath a light. He is naked.

When he hits his mark, the fluorescent bulb above lights up like a Dan Flavin installation, exposing the intimate details of the dancer's frontal body. This happens twelve more times with twelve more performers. The audience remains quiet, respectful, embarrassed, and anthropological, watching as the bodies take turns rotating in precise forty-five degree increments, like a kind of human rotisserie, giving us perspective from all sides. As bodies shift, they land in various spatial relationships with one another—face-to-face, front-to-back, and back-to-back—and (homo- and hetero-) social and sexual narratives—both momentary and real—emerge, crystallize, and disappear from view.

Without affect or visible discomfort, the men seal their penises against their abdomens with two-inch-thick white adhesive strips. Women seal their unshaven labia shut with the same and, one by one, performers begin putting on layers of large, white, men's underwear—one pair over another over another—until they, like the garbage bags before them, bulge in diaper-like proportions. And so begins the show.

*Mauvais Genre* simultaneously invites our medical gaze and, somehow, allows us to feel the intensity of being watched and exposed, twisted and distorted, ourselves. As performers lie prostrate on the floor, convulsing and contorted, for instance—a man's breasts beat the hardwood floor; another's shoulder rotates out of socket, in circles, over and over; a woman balances the whole of her body on her two hands, her feet up in the air like some kind of torturous break dance before an inevitable, crashing collapse—we recognize their symbolic pain and, for an instant, endure it too.

With a second adhesive strip, performers affix small, plastic pill canisters to the bottoms of their heels. In these makeshift stilettos, they pose—supermodel-like—in their newly feminized statures, bend over, and grab (in a single shot) the fragile towers of Retrovir that, like a loaded gun on the stage set, have been tempting our curiosity from the first moment. Arms full, they strut, ladylike, around the stage's interior as boxes crash to the ground in gentle heaps. The sweat from their bodies forces the adhesive to loosen and pill canisters to break free, or remain trapped, sideways, under their gait. They walk undaunted until suddenly and all at once, everything still in grip comes cascading to the ground. The inevitable stillness that follows is arresting.

I am reminded of many things while watching: the sheer vastness in numbers of the dead which, like the AIDS Memorial Quilt on the lawn of the US Capitol's Mall (or the antiretroviral medication on



A performer wraps her face in a pair of briefs before discarding them onto the floor in *Mauvais Genre*. Photo: Marc Damage.

the floor of the theatre) covers the ground with repeated square patterns of grief and loss; the particularly unique burden of a particularly (post)modern illness which, due to the very visible toll it often takes on the body, strips its host of the privilege of a private life; the difficult performance of normative gender and sexuality which, in moments of vulnerability and / or attack, collapses, exposed for what it is—a perilous act, a sham, teetering at the edge of oblivion.

In a queer *deus ex machina* of sorts, the performers line the stage in two white, intersecting paths, carpeted by their now-discarded briefs. As two men in tight—almost mermaid-like—black lingerie walk down the makeshift runway toward the off-stage exit, “New York, New York”—played by an orchestra of car horns—is softly piped in. The two performers sing along in the most campy way, as do several members of the house, as the ensemble hums the base. The echoes from the audience are more wistful, melancholic, a bit nostalgic, though, as if we were bidding these men farewell forever, or burying them on the other side of the curtain.

The experiences of indignity, hypervisibility, and humiliation that *Mauvais Genre* frames for view shocks, haunts, and dismays. The virtuosic nature with which the performance is executed, however, produces an underlying feeling of hope, intimating a “genre” of life that, while precarious, is rich, too, with momentary flashes of genius and grace.

**JACLYN I. PRYOR**

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**L.#09-LONDON EPISODE OF THE TRAGEDIA ENDOGONIDIA.** By Societas Raffaello Sanzio. Directed by Romeo Castellucci. Alexander Kasser Theater, Montclair State University, Montclair, New Jersey. 7 October 2005.

Director Romeo Castellucci calls the *Tragedia Endogonia* cycle “an organism on the run,” comprising events that leave no time for intelligence or interpretation, only immediate response. For the past four years spectators around the world have been chasing the eleven episodes of this mutating rumination on contemporary tragedy, but it was not until autumn 2005 that the performance company Societas Raffaello Sanzio (SRS) managed to find an American host city for its project. For three nights in October, New Jersey’s Montclair State University presented the American premiere of the London Episode (*L.#09*) in its year-old Alexander Kasser Theater.

Based in Cesena, Italy, the SRS was founded in 1981 by Castellucci, his sister Claudia, and his wife Chiara Guidi. In twenty-five years, the company has produced a remarkable body of iconoclastic work, grafting its singular vision to the roots of classical Indo-European theatricality. Previous performances include revisions of canonical dramas such as *Julius Caesar* and the *Oresteia* alongside adaptations of foundational texts such as the Book of Genesis and *Gilgamesh*. Their most recent project, the *Tragedia Endogonia* (2002–present), is a cycle of eleven episodes spanning ten different European cities (beginning and ending in Cesena) that conceives contemporary tragedy as an open system of evolution.

Each episode of the *Tragedia Endogonia* functions as a mutation of the same constellation of forms, a recurrence that suspends the arrival of a final act / image. As the title of the project evinces, here the tragedy’s drive toward death fuses with the moment of conception in an endless spiral of production (“endogonic” is the biological term for an organism possessing both male and female gonads and therefore capable of ceaseless self-repro-

duction). That this endless cycling operates on both the level of form and content was readily apparent in the New Jersey incarnation of *L.#09*.

*L.#09* acts as a microcosm for the *Tragedia* as a whole, replicating the peripatetic movement that returns to its origin a changed, but related body. At the start of the piece, Yourself Before (Francesca Proia), a woman with long blond hair and face entirely painted black, murders Yourself After (Eva Castellucci), an identically dressed child, with a simple stylized cutting gesture. Yourself Before is stripped of clothing and, donning a mask, ritually mourns her loss within a timeless landscape of geometrical forms, her body wracked in contortions as if trying to give birth again or to excise the event. Actress Francesca Proia miraculously twists her body into depths of sorrow and distraction, passing between grieving mother and raging animal. Eventually, she steps inside one of the rectangles and emerges half-covered with black liquid. Backing up against the scrim that encloses the downstage edge of the interior, she leaves a small stain on the screen before exiting the stage.

The second half of *L.#09* follows the child, Yourself After, into a dream on the edge of death where a second ritual elaborately portrays the mythic birth of the British nation. The episode closes as blackness envelops the stage, turning its interior white space inside out and returning both the protagonists to the moment immediately before the murderous act. Now they dress in black with faces painted white, staring out into the audience, photographic negatives of the event they are about to repeat. This final image projects an endless cycle of inversions spinning beyond the curtain’s close, encapsulating all the potential worlds at play in the *Tragedia*’s other episodes.

Once detached from its original host city, each episode refigures itself within the new site of performance. Among other changes to the New Jersey version, an infamous scene that showed Saint Paul cutting out his tongue and feeding it to a mass of kittens was removed, because the company feared the reference would be indecipherable to an American audience. A productive addition to the piece concerned the transition between the two parts of the episode. Originally, immediately after Yourself Before marks the scrim and exits the stage, workers in coveralls labeled “Raffaello Sanzio Inc.” efficiently clean away the woman’s black marks, literally purging the traces of the tragic act from the stage. The New Jersey incarnation features a different cleaner: a young clown with a bucket. In place of a mop, he carries a meat hook and the liver of a cow. His attempts to wash the stage with this organ of purification are woefully inadequate (an older version of this