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Review of Dolan's Throws Like a Girl

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David J. Lee and Kimiko Gelman in *Proof* by David Auburn, directed by Heidi Helen Davis.
 Photo: Michael Lamont.

churn out a contrived whodunit, Davis reveals an instinctive grasp of Auburn's straightforward, deceptively simple text. When Catherine begs her delusional father to abandon his notepad ramblings and come inside, he ignores her in favor of cold numeric "artistry." Magwili portrays a frazzled savant, an amoral jurist whose strategy yields no truth but his own crazed mind. Later, Catherine's rage forms the emotional crescendo of the play. Despite her demons, it is she who recognizes this crucial distinction between stale academic answers and self-evident truth. Catherine's insistence on the irrelevance of "his" proof exposes academic strategy as an empty farce, a pale substitute for trust.

Auburn's ending, arguably, is contrived, as Catherine submits to Hal's appeasing tone and agrees to explain her mathematical proof. Although Gelman's wonderful performance makes one long for Catherine's vindication, the text offers no time for nay-sayers to adopt her view. After learning that no one else could have possibly written the mathematical proof, Hal approaches her with evidence of her credibility, and Catherine accepts his affection in a troubling act of self-betrayal. Her

vision of proof as immeasurable and profoundly human must wait for another day. While the text denies Catherine the autonomy she craves, this impressive cast rescues the finale from cloying pathos, offering tentative, trenchant views on Asian Americans in the realms of math, pop culture, and American life today.

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THROWS LIKE A GIRL: FESTIVAL OF INTIMATE PERFORMANCE BY OUTRAGEOUS WOMEN. Curated by Jill Dolan. Co-produced by The University of Texas at Austin and The Rude Mechanicals Theatre Collective. The Off-Center. Austin, Texas. 17 February–23 April 2005.

Now in its third season, the Throws Like a Girl festival is a biennial celebration of virtuosic feminist performance art produced in a small blackbox theatre in East Austin, appropriately known as the Off-Center. In past years, local audiences have gathered to see and discuss Marty Pottenger's *City Water Tunnel #3*, Holly's Hughes's *Preaching to the Perverted*, Deb Margolin's *O Wholly Night and Other Jewish Solecisms*, Peggy Shaw's *Menopausal Gentleman* and *To My Chagrin*, and Terry Galloway's *Lardo Weeping*. Coinciding with the twenty-fifth anniversaries of both the Women's One World (WOW) Café and the Split Britches Theatre Company, this year's festival featured founding artists from both companies, as well as those artists whose feminist and antiracist voices continue to redefine American theatre. Varied in structure, tone, and style, each piece employed humor—ironic, parodic, erotic—as performative means to political ends.

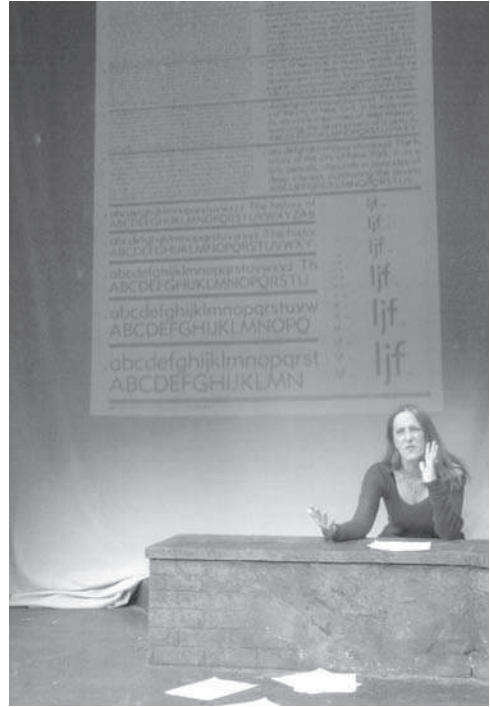
Founding Split Britches member Deb Margolin kicked off the two-month stretch of events with her latest "performance novel," *Index to Idioms* (dir. Merri Ann Milwe). The play opened with Margolin seated stage right, half-lit, in a black velvet dress, maroon cotton pullover, and black, soft-soled flats. With closed eyes, she listened intently and privately to an aria. The sharp screech of children's voices demanding "Mom!" soon interrupt her solitude, and her eyes open in acknowledgment to meet our own. These voices will prove central to Margolin's multiple-character solo performance about nascent sexuality, motherhood, loss, and unconditional love. The twelve episodic monologues that make up *Index* provide snapshots of



Deb Margolin in *Index to Idioms*. Photo: Jim Baldassare.

Margolin at various stages of her sexual and emotional life, traversing what Margolin claims is the “collapsible boundary between fiction and memoir.” The monologues are strung together through their shared relationship to various English-language idioms: “Mind your P’s and Q’s” presents a woman with a “writer’s habit,” moonlighting as a typesetter and in search of the perfect font; “Cut it Out” explores a pregnant mother ready for birthing; “Keep Under One’s Hat” looks at a woman battling Hodgkin’s disease and hair loss. Upstage center the idioms are projected on a white scrim before and after each vignette, bracketing the monologue and reminding the audience of the multivalent ways in which language can signal meaning and stories can serve as an index to affective life.

While Margolin delivers the text with her signature brand of unrelenting and captivating hilarity, one feels an undercurrent of melancholy throughout. In “Know One’s Own Mind,” for example, Margolin positions herself as marginalized by the old beater station wagon in which she drives her three-year-old to school—replete with dragging muffler and graffiti-tagged with the words “TOTAL CHAOS”—while the other moms drive Mercedes and Lexuses and wear fur coats and Estée Lauder perfume. This outsidership is highlighted as Margolin delivers a tour de force re-enactment of the school’s holiday (read “Christmas”) recital in which her daughter, costumed as a penguin, creates her own brand of total chaos, leading a gaggle of preschoolers in the very public and embarrassing toppling of the school’s holiday tree. In “Come Alive,” Margolin describes the “fancy ladies” in her neighborhood who refuse to show emotion or acknowledge her, calling this refusal a “contract with mortality.” When one such woman has fallen in love and unexpectedly gets “deep” with Margolin in the frozen foods section of the local supermarket, Margolin is touched; when Margolin describes the way in which the same woman ignores her the next time they meet, we cathexis with Margolin, sharing her sense of wonderment about the banality of cruelty. Indeed, Margolin’s performance of Jewishness and working-class subjectivity situates her as Other in particular ways. Yet Margolin ably ironizes her experiences without, as she claims, a “single moment of cynicism” in the entire performance. Instead, Margolin offers her audiences glimpses of hope through imaginative world making. In “Face the Music,” for instance, Margolin describes acts of “ontological vandalism” that she commits while driving alone in her car playing the Doors’ “Riders on the Storm” while watching old ladies play cards on the roadside, infusing the action with new meaning to her and our delight. In “Snow Job,” which closes the show, Margolin de-



Deb Margolin in *Index to Idioms*.
Photo: Jim Baldassare.

scribes how she made snow—and made snow fall—in the bathroom of her college dormitory, to the astonishment and disbelief of other less “magical” students.

Throughout the performance, Margolin holds a script, sometimes reading from it, always softly discarding its pages onto the stage’s floor as she moves through the text. Utilitarian as well as poetical, the falling pages function as a kind of feminist *gestus*, marking the passage of time, making visible her performance labor, and reminding the audience of the precious liveness and ephemerality of this shared event. Told with a poet’s linguistic detail, a humanist’s compassion, and a comedian’s sense of the ironic, Margolin’s piece resignifies the ordinary as extraordinary, leading the spectator through a joyful and devastating meditation on the present.

As the festival’s second installment, solo performance legends Marga Gomez and Carmelita Tropicana (Alina Troyano), who met at WOW, joined forces to present their first collaboration, *Single Wet Female* (dir. David Schweizer). The two women conceived the project in Austin in 2001

when performing separately during *Crossing Borders*, a conference on US Latino/a Queer Performance. *Single Wet Female* is a lesbian noir send-up of the 1992 blockbuster thriller *Single White Female* (starring Bridget Fonda). In this parodic and politicized retelling, Gomez plays Margaret, a white “professional music supervisor” with an aversion to bright colors, loud music, spicy food, and anything “ethnic-y.” Tropicana plays the eager-to-please butch, Cahmy, a camera salesperson from Minnesota whom Margaret meets when shopping for her upcoming betrothal to fiancé Murray Bertram (performed on screen by drag icon Murray Hill). When Margaret splits with Murray, Cahmy becomes her new “soul-roommate,” sleeping in the bathtub of Margaret’s tiny, rent-controlled New York City apartment and pursuing her single “white” friend with (very thinly veiled) homoerotic and psychosexual panache.

All of the details of the set, props, and costumes, from the claw-foot tub in which Tropicana/Cahmy sleeps to Gomez/Margaret’s high femme fingernails, are bright pink. Gomez dons a thick, blonde wig, cotton short-shorts, platform shoes, and an affected, high-pitched voice; Tropicana, on the other hand, wears her black hair spiked up and rock solid, costumed in a bright orange jumpsuit and black combat boots. She wears thick metal rods through her ears, and speaks in a faux, low, monotone. Gomez walks with her hands demurely at her sides, occasionally touching her cheeks in surprise; Tropicana hunches over, arms bent, muscles flexed, and lips pursed, often addressing her lines to the audience deadpan. In many ways, Gomez and Tropicana play with, as well as against, stereotype, configured as the monster version of a butch/femme couple but cast opposite of type, or, as Gomez jokingly put it, each portraying the type of woman she usually dates. As Cahmy increasingly mirrors her object of desire in costume and affect—wearing (at one point backwards) a matching blonde wig, femme fatale outfit, and platform shoes—we are reminded of the liminal space that can separate desire to be with from desire to be like.

On both women, the costumes also work as a kind of double drag, signaling, through their performances of white and heterosexual counterfeit, the artists’ and the characters’ real lesbianism and *Latinidad*. When Margaret suffers a gastro-emotional attack because she discovers “spice” in her pizza and Cahmy proceeds to murder the pizza delivery man quid pro quo, we laugh because we recognize the lampooning of white femininity as lack(luster), the stereotyping of lesbian as monster-killer, and, most significantly, the performers peeking out from beneath.



Deb Margolin in *Index to Idioms*.
Photo: Jim Baldassare.

Indeed, as Margaret renounces phone calls from Spanish-speaking family members—demanding to know, “Who gave these people cell phones anyway?”—we are offered a taste of what José Muñoz has described as their performance of “disidentification,” a strategic lampooning of insider and outsider culture at once. It is no coincidence, then, that in the film clip that frames the play, infants Margaret and Cahmy—replete with pacifiers and bonnets—are undergoing a series of “Malta Goya” experiments, conducted by a “Dr. Muñoz” (played by Schweizer’s hand). A clever citation to Dr. Kenneth Clark’s now-infamous 1940’s “Doll Tests”—in which Clark tested children’s racial preferences in doll choices, resulting in new theories of internalized racism—the experiments prove central as the true identities of Margaret and Cahmy unfold.

In the show’s final scene, which functions as a kind of performative postscript, Gomez appears in a long black wig and a multicolored, pan-ethnic dress, speaking in a thick Spanish accent and chomping on plantains. Reminiscent of Coco Fusco’s performance of racialized excess in *Two Undiscovered Amerindians* [. . .], Gomez’s persona in this final sequence operates as a kind of racial coming-out, simultaneously embodying utopian fantasies of



Michigan (Lois Weaver) tells the story of her birth to “twin sister” Deeluxe (Peggy Shaw) in Holly Hughes’s *Dress Suits to Hire*.
Photo: Dona Ann McAdams.

cultural recovery and performing spectatorial desires for racial authenticity—with a knowing wink.

WOW founders and Split Britches founding members Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver closed out the festival with *Dress Suits to Hire* (written by Hughes, directed by Weaver). Set in a Lower East Side clothing rental shop in which “twin sisters” Deeluxe (Shaw) and Michigan (Weaver) live, *Dress Suits* mixes vaudevillian bawdiness with high camp absurdism to produce an hour-long visual, aural, and kinesthetic feast for the senses. The play opens with Shaw and Weaver seated center, costumed in identical silk, floor-length robes—Weaver facing upstage and Shaw downstage, each with an eye on the other, tightly holding a glass of sherry. It seems as if the two have lingered in this watchful vigilance since the play premiered at PS 122 in 1987. Despite Deeluxe’s repeated proclamations of her desire to leave, claiming that what she wants is “not in this shop. It may not even be on this block. I may have to cross Second Avenue to get it”—neither character ever makes an exit. Even in death, after the menacing and misogynistic Little Peter (played by Shaw’s right hand) strangles Deeluxe to death and Michigan half-heartedly buries her under a brown fur coat, she rises again to sing—replete with giant yellow fan to serve as backdrop—a virtuosic rendition of “Amato Mio” (“à la Bela Lugosi”). Escape, then, while not materially possible, is met through narratives of role-play and enactments of fantasy.

A sparse stage set and evocative costume pieces aid in producing the play’s fantastical enactments. A few suggestive props (two chairs and a small wooden table, a neon-pink *Dress Suits to Hire* sign, a hanging lightbulb, an old radio, a dress form wrapped in plastic) allow the play’s rich and dirty

language to take centerstage. Two clothing racks, hosting an array of potential costumes, enable multiple layers of erotic play within the erotic play—a kind of drag within the drag—to dominate this nonlinear narrative. When, for example, a long, blue, strapless gown falls from the “sky” (prompted by Weaver’s command that it do so), the notoriously butch Shaw, as Deeluxe, sheds her silk robe—revealing black lingerie underneath—and dons the blue gown, moving downstage left to sing a breathy-voiced and bedroom-eyed *Put the Blame on Me*, à la Marilyn Monroe. According to Shaw, it was this moment of feminine drag that garnered her an Obie nearly twenty years prior. That Shaw is able to adopt the voice and gesture of a feminine lounge act is no surprise—she is a seasoned performer whose *Hot Peaches* roots have a long-standing tradition of cabaret—but what’s marvelous is the way in which Shaw is able to simultaneously fully inhabit this jazzy number and parody it, every lip pucker and shoulder roll working as a kind of half-baked citation to the repertoire of the feminine.

Geography and memory, like gender and sexuality, are revealed as productively unstable throughout. While the play is set in New York, Hughes evidences her heartland sensibilities, most overtly by naming Weaver’s character after her home state and by the scenic backdrop (painted by Madge Darlington) whose earthtones are reminiscent of a midwestern sand dune. Following a comical butch/femme costume duel—cowboy hat to boots, silk scarf to blouse, toothpick to bubblegum, and blue to pink hula hoop—Deeluxe and Michigan re-enact a past roadside encounter somewhere between Tulsa and California and, encircled in Michigan’s hot-pink hula hoop and entranced by her dangerously femme persona, share the first and only kiss of the play. It is passionate and timeless. Watching, I was reminded of the kiss in Split Britches’ 1992 collaboration, *Lesbians Who Kill* (written by Margolin), when Shaw, as June, proclaims, “We kiss for courage [. . .] We kiss for memory. We kiss before we fall into history [. . .] we kiss to be remembered . . . They’ll remember us . . . They’ll talk about us . . . we’re falling into history.”

At the close of *Dress Suits*, after Deeluxe reads a letter from Little Peter that describes the future as “just like the past,” Michigan pours sherry for an elegiac toast and softly proclaims, “Don’t worry. We’ll never see it.” In this Beckettian final moment, it is unclear whether they will “never see it” because they will remain cloistered indoors or because the world itself will not survive. This line, which rings through the blackout, appears doubly ironic, as the audience knows that Weaver and



Front: Peggy Shaw as Deeluxe. Back: Lois Weaver as Michigan in Holly Hughes's *Dress Suits to Hire*.
Photo: Dona Ann McAdams.

Shaw, like Margolin, Gomez, and Tropicana, have and will continue to have long careers as working feminist artists. Like *Dress Suits*, their work will continue to see the future and be seen in the present because, as Tropicana aptly put it, "If it's really good, it's good politics."

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LIGHT. By Jean-Claude Van Itallie. Directed by Jessica Kubzansky. Theatre@Boston Court, Pasadena, California. 23 October 2004.

The year-old Theatre@Boston Court of Pasadena, California, which has already gained a reputation for adventurous new work, recently premiered Jean-Claude Van Itallie's illumination of Voltaire's life-long journey to maturity, *Light*. Drawing on a variety of documentary sources, Van Itallie stages Voltaire's quest of self-discovery through written records of two of his most important relationships: his love affair with Emilie, Marquise du Chatelet, and his friendship with his benefactor, Frederick the Great of Prussia. Under Jessica Kubzansky's

direction, *Light* offers the theatrical version of an epistolary novel, a dance of letters that segue into dialogue, interspersed by confessional narratives and direct action.

Well-known as a collaborative writer since his early days with the Open Theater, Itallie appears to have found new collaborators in this trio of historical and literary luminaries. Voltaire, of course, is known primarily as the author of *Candide* and several sensational plays; he held the public eye as the intermittent darling and scourge of Louis XV and the attendant Catholic hierarchy. The beautiful Emilie, Marquise du Chatelet, was an accomplished scientist in her own right, who essayed a brilliant translation of Newton's *Principia Mathematica*. Frederick the Great was known as a brutal warmonger who, nonetheless, also loved music and poetry, and most of all, revered Voltaire. Although they occupied distinctly different times and spaces, du Chatelet and Frederick's epistolary competition for the psyche of Voltaire forms the battle for possession that provides the piece's central dramatic thread. These threads unravel austere, with each character highlighted in an atmospheric shaft of light.

The three characters intersect rather than intercut; they flutter, traverse, and part in the minuet