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THE COMPLETE SCRIPTS OF
DEBORAH STEIN'S
GOD SAVE GERTRUDE

CHIORI MIYAGAWA'S
I HAVE BEEN TO HIROSHIMA MON AMOUR

ALISON CROGGON ON AUSTRALIAN DIRECTORS

Theatre Forum

Front Cover Photo: Barrie Kosky's *Poppea*.

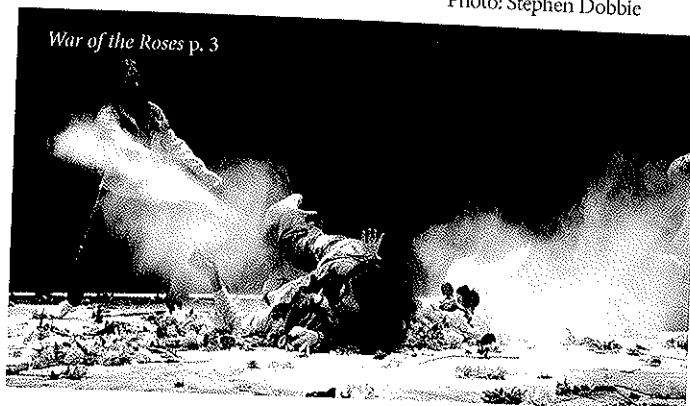
Photo: Courtesy of Vienna Schauspielhaus

Back Cover Photo: Punchdrunk's *The Masque of the Red Death*.
Photo: Stephen Dobbie

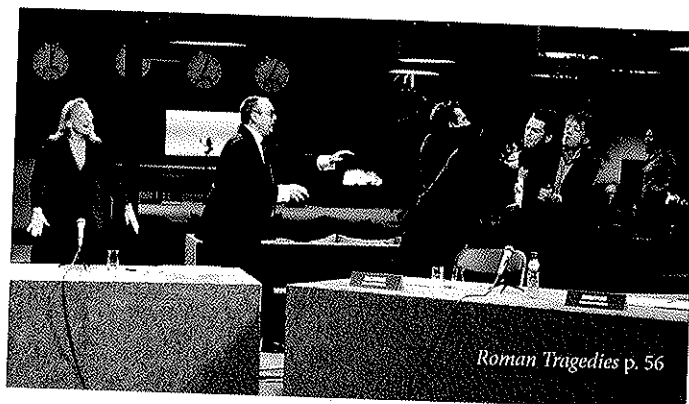
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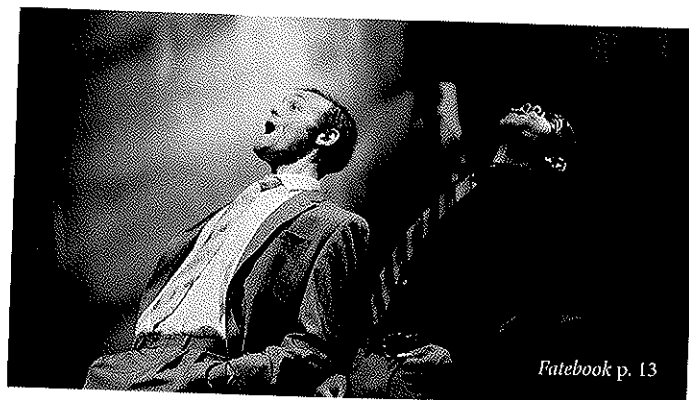
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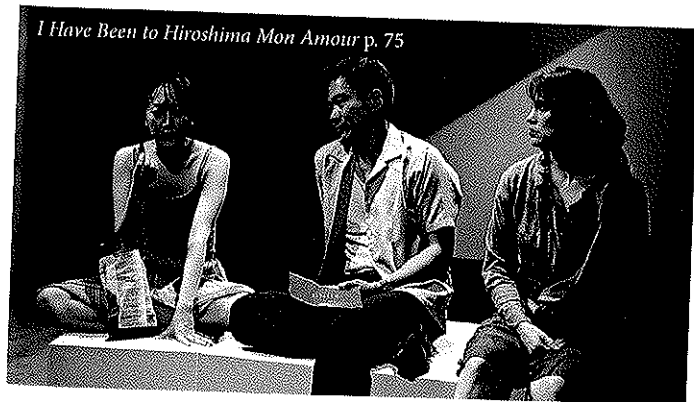
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"THIS PLAY IS ALSO A CONCERT": THE HERE AND NOW OF DEBORAH STEIN'S *GOD SAVE GERTRUDE*

BY NAYSAN MOJGANI



Photo 1: Gertrude (Jill Van Velzer) says "I don't want no cameras, want my poetry back, like Patti got, yeah, hi Patti." Photo: Ed Krieger, Boston Court

I like Shakespeare, but I'm not quite sure what this is going to be. I don't know if I'll like this." It is Sunday afternoon in Pasadena, and I'm sitting in the Theatre @ Boston Court, listening to the older gentleman in the row in front of me grumbling to his companions. I grin to myself, for he is unknowingly asking the perfect question: what is this play, combining Shakespeare and Patti Smith and post-Soviet Eastern Europe? What to make of it? What to do with it? At the end of the show, I grin even wider, for the anonymous gentleman is on his feet clapping and cheering.

"What's the next generation of artists doing? We talk about it all the time, but we don't do anything." It is Monday afternoon in La Jolla, and I'm sitting at my desk, on the phone with Polly Carl, former Producing Artistic Director of the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis and current Director of Artistic Development for Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company. Carl brought the play to the 2006 PlayLabs festival at the Playwrights' Center after reading a draft of the script. The play pushes against old boundaries, respecting that which has come before, while simultaneously laying claim to it and making it anew.

"I love theatre because it is live, and that's also why I go to rock shows." It is Tuesday afternoon, and I'm sitting on my couch, on the phone again, this time listening to Deborah Stein, writer of *God Save Gertrude*. I nod as Stein

explains how the liveness of music connects to the audience in a way that much of modern American theatre fails to do. At a time when so many theatre artists are trying to borrow from film and television, Stein is more interested in those tools available only to live performances. Whether a play or a punk rock concert, the impact on an audience of a living body 15 feet away is something that video simply can't provide. *God Save Gertrude* is both play and punk rock show, and has all the impact and all the raw appeal that that implies. "There are so many plays for people who want to sit in the dark," Stein says. And I nod in agreement: *Gertrude* is not one of them.

Stein started writing the play while getting her MFA in Playwriting at Brown University; *Gertrude* was, in fact, the first play Stein wrote solo, having worked entirely on collaborations before Brown. The initial draft was an eight-page long scene, written for a class on adaptation. Short it may have been, but all the basic elements of the play were there: the four characters, Gertrude's opening and closing monologues, and the preoccupation with music. Instead of the unseen presence she holds in the current incarnation, Patti Smith was on stage as a "ghost" of sorts, lip-syncing to her own music. Stein tried to put *God Save Gertrude* away, but couldn't entirely let go of the play: even in those mere eight pages, she felt that she had created something more

true to her own voice than anything else she had written before. Fortunately, she brushed it off and fleshed it out, first as part of the 2006 PlayLabs, then in a 2008 workshop, produced by the Workhaus Collective, the playwright-focused company-in-residence at the Playwrights' Center, of which Stein is a Producing Director; finally, *Gertrude* took the stage in a full professional production in fall 2009, at Pasadena's Boston Court, directed by Michael Michetti.

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the inspiration for Stein's *God Save Gertrude*, Gertrude, Hamlet's mother, never gets a chance to defend herself; as Stein explains, Shakespeare's Gertrude is either an idiot, entirely unaware of what's going on behind the scenes in Elsinore, or she's a monster who knowingly and willingly marries the man who murdered her husband. Stein's play, then, began in part as an opportunity for Gertrude to tell her side of things. There was also a certain amount of gender equalization operating, Stein admits. There is a decided lack of women "holding the stage" on their own in Shakespeare's plays, talking to the audience and presenting themselves through soliloquies. In anchoring her play around Gertrude, Stein has made a gesture towards balancing those scales.

While Gertrude and *Hamlet* provided the inspiration and the starting point for Stein's play, *God Save Gertrude* is very much its own entity now. The parallels are clear—Mama's Boy/Hamlet, Daddy's Girl/Ophelia, Man/Claudius—and the original play certainly informs the structure of the relationships in Gertrude, but those who are unfamiliar with *Hamlet* will still appreciate the story and the beauty of this play. Even those familiar with *Hamlet* may find themselves overlooking, or even forgetting, that there was something before this. There are times, in fact, where an over-familiarity with *Hamlet* works against the play, as those audience members who can't let go of what they think *Hamlet* is may find themselves adrift in Stein's play: the play and its audiences work best the further they stray from Shakespeare and from the familiar theatrical forms.

Ultimately, *God Save Gertrude* is both a play and a concert. The Workhaus production was marketed and staged as both, with a live band on stage and the space laid out as a music venue. Boston Court left *Gertrude* alone on stage, accompanied only by audio and video recordings, and used a proscenium configuration with a slight thrust. However, even with the Boston Court's balance leaning a bit more towards the "play" end of the equation, the performance was still both play and rock show. Sitting in the audience, I felt at times like getting to my feet and moshing, and the younger members of the audience cheered and whistled during songs as though they were at any other concert. Although the aesthetics of these two art forms may seem to be at odds, Stein and her collaborator, composer David Hanbury, have managed to weld them

together, crafting a piece which is not only able to shift fluidly from one to the other to both simultaneously, but also manages to show the commonalities between the two traditions. There were moments in both productions where I was unsure if I was supposed to be viewing the individual moment as a play or as a punk show, and those moments were the most beautiful, the most heart-breaking, the funniest, the moments I still remember.

"I'm burning up in front of your eyes now. This is how I know I'm alive." It is Friday night in Minneapolis, two years ago, and I'm sitting in the Playwrights' Center, while a well-dressed woman screams out to the revolutionary she used to be. The Shortcuts are playing fast and hard and raw on stage behind her. And it is rough. And it is beautiful. And it is right here. And it is new. And it is now.

Naysan Mojgani is a student in the UC Irvine/UC San Diego Joint PhD Program in Theatre and Drama. Prior to entering graduate school, he lived in Minneapolis, working with Theatre de la Jeune Lune, Hardcover Theatre, 3AM Productions, and Red Eye Theater, among others. He is managing editor of TheatreForum.

Photo 2: Set by Anna Lawrence

Photo: Stacy Schwartz



GOD SAVE GERTRUDE

BY DEBORAH STEIN

MUSIC BY DAVID HANBURY

"Any sane person would have left long ago. But I have my sons."

—Diana, Princess of Wales

"It tore my limbs off and put them back on in a whole different order. I was like 'Shit, yeah, oh my God!' and then I threw up."

—Michael Stipe on the first time he heard the album *Horses* by Patti Smith

"Never dress down for the poor, they won't respect you for it. They want their first lady to look like a million dollars."

—Imelda Marcos

WHO:
GERTRUDE
MAMA'S BOY
DADDY'S GIRL
MAN

WHERE: [Photo 2]

Outside the city limits. An unrecognizable wasteland. Nuclear. Looks like Russia. A road between Moscow and the Caucasus. All the action takes place in a decayed/ bombed-out theatre or music club. Decadence all burned up, holes in the ground, rubble spilling into the masses.

WHEN:

The recent future or an alternative now.



Photo 1: Jill Van Velzer as Gertrude

Photo: Ed Krieger, Boston Cour

A NOTE ON THE PERFORMANCE

With each song, Gertrude strips down from her royal finery to a more basic uniform of a self-styled rock n roller. For example, if she begins clothed in a ball gown, by the end of the play she has shed her glitzy attire for the basic slip underneath, perhaps hiked up and ripped, held up by a hundred safety pins. This play is also a concert. It is most alive when Gertrude is backed by a real live band (but it has also been done with

recorded tracks). Sometimes the actress playing Gertrude plays the guitar; sometimes she doesn't. Her monologues and addresses to the audience should be adjusted accordingly — i.e., to introduce the band at an appropriate moment, to ask for more guitar in the monitor (or whatever) or to take a moment to tune her guitar — a little bit of ad lib goes a long way to creating the sense that Gertrude is really playing to a real live audience.

It's great if Gertrude can see the people in the seats and even better if she can move around among them. Most important is that Gertrude has a direct relationship to the audience—she really sees us, we're really there for her—so please, no fourth wall during the monologues.

Please visit www.theatreforum.org to listen to songs from the play.