

Gabriel Drozdov

Prof. Brewer Ball

THEA 203: Special Topics in Theater History

26 September 2016

### Talk

“I’m very excited by work that speaks many different languages and can talk to many different people.” —*Kaneza Schaal, in an interview with BRIC TV*

*Go Forth* is equal parts strange and familiar. The avant-garde interpretation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead* (better translated as *Going Forth by Day*) plays with the hefty role of translating its funerary canon into something empathetically understood by the audience. Author Kaneza Schaal wastes no body nor space in her efforts to captivate her crowd, as we are guided through the posthumous journey from our descent into the theater’s crypt-like enclosure to the play’s abrupt and comical conclusion. Suffice to say, the holistic experience was frightening, funny, fiendish and friendly, but still very *odd*. *Go Forth* was odd to the extent that an audience less versed with the avant-garde may have mentally tapped out from the difficult production despite Schaal’s attempt to intrigue everyone, at least to the point where an individual is inclined to feel their way through the play, even if the individual does not understand the work as a whole.

Somehow, I felt that *Go Forth* was meant for Wesleyan’s CFA Theater, as the production utilized the space so beautifully that any other location would need to tick many boxes in order to not seem like a compromise. I had to descend a flight of stairs to even arrive at the stage, passing empty seats that reminded me we were going somewhere dead and dark, where the usual audience is left behind. Art installments along the walls guided me through the vignettes I would soon watch, and helped to later coagulate an abstract plot from the often detached scenes of the performance. Strangest of all, a man sat motionless in front of the temporary wall that enclosed the performance

space. This man sat with the stage's ghost light, providing an eerie image and tone that was only exacerbated once I entered the performance space.

There was no ghost light inside, as there was barely light at all. In the corner stood a couple of mostly motionless figures, but the space managed to be as charming as it was intimidating. Shimmering walls coated the sides of the theater, while the back wall was composed of stark concrete ladled with dim-but-colorful bottles. Finally, a record player played to the side of the space, while wireframe statues composed the center focus. The descent was complete, and I felt I was somewhere unwelcoming, as if I had intruded on a phantom's realm and had placed myself in danger with my entrance.

Each vignette reinforced my fears of being unwelcome in this dead, foreign space, which was made stranger by the paradoxically welcoming bow performed by the main cast of three men of color. I mention their skin as these actors ultimately portrayed the cultures of black men from different backgrounds, whether the men came from song and dance, from superstition, from comedy, or from anything of the sort. The result was similar in effect to Young Jean Lee's *The Shipment*, in which several unrelated scenes are united through the portrayal of different black identities. Unlike Young Jean Lee, Kaneza Schaal juxtaposed her already juxtaposing aesthetic styles with an ancient text, which granted the performance a larger number of avant-garde onion rings rich with meaning.

Perhaps Schaal verged too deep with her layers of weirdness. The large bulk of the performance was altogether imperceptible and inaccessible, and even though I enjoyed the action and dynamicity of the actors' chants, spasms, and unintelligible dialogues, I had no idea what was happening. Vignette upon vignette, my confusion rose to a peak until the various projectors stopped playing, the men stopped chanting, and the stage was moved right up to the audience. In the fifth vignette, entitled "The Negative Confessions", Schaal found a way to make avant-garde accessible.

One by one, each actor came out and gave a comedic monologue, interspersed with what I believe were the “42 Declarations of Purity”. The actors portrayed what seemed to be performative versions of themselves, referencing CFA staff as well as the performance space and the audience, but their calm and understandable language ironically kept me on edge. I felt I was being deceived, put on by a charade of comradery, and that this trio of jokes served to broadly explain what has happened and what would happen.

Of course we returned to the avant-garde, but the entire audience seemed entranced. Those who before were falling asleep or looking off now had too many places to look at once. And yet only two vignettes remained, with the final vignette serving little more than quiet closure to the ritualistic performance. The atmosphere perfected by the fifth vignette seemed to either come too late, or came without substance to follow. Early on I figured that it would be senseless for me to try and understand the performance, and I’d rather experience it unabashedly, but it did not seem that the audience was as invested in the performance until we were acquainted with these actors. The change was as drastic as comparing film to theater. Either we were watching actors perform, or we were wrestling to understand the meaning in a friend’s weird project he’d bragged about for a year.

I still wonder if the play only talks to those with an open mind. Christopher Myers excelled at crafting a unique space to play in, but Schaal’s adaptation doesn’t force you to enter its text in the same way that we enter the space. In a straight adaptation of the Egyptian *Book of the Dead*, sure, the accessibility may be less important, but Schaal’s intention was to incite a specific response from the audience. Maybe, probably, there are other languages in the performance that I could not decipher, because they did not speak to me. In that case the play succeeded, and I’m sure this occurred with many individuals. I only wish that, had I seen *Go Forth* four or five years ago, I would have had the same enjoyment as I did now, and I don’t know if that would have been the case.