
Review

Reviewed Work(s): BROKE HOUSE by Caden Manson and Jemma Nelson

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PERFORMANCE REVIEWS

Sarah Bay-Cheng, Editor

BROKE HOUSE. By Caden Manson, Jemma Nelson, and Big Art Group. Directed by Caden Manson. Abrons Arts Center Playhouse, New York City. 7 January and 7 April 2012.

Since the 2011 Occupy movement captured people's imaginations and rekindled a sense of protest and activism in perhaps unlikely places, a genre of "occupy theatre" has begun to emerge. Big Art Group's *Broke House* firmly established itself within this trend, representing a collapsing and chaotic world where a house was literally taken down in the face of eviction and its inhabitants prepared to wear their homes on their backs. It was perhaps also a play about history and queer temporalities, reaching back to the past to stage a present fixated on an uncertain future. This contemporary queering, or perhaps occupation, of Chekhov's *Three Sisters* sampled *Grey Gardens*, *Big Brother*, internet scamming, and documentary-style filmmaking for an economically exhausted age. With *Broke House*, New York City-based Big Art Group continued their ongoing investigation into the ways that media shape performance and life, here examining the mediated realities of a working middle class as it faces economic downturn. Throughout the show, the actors transitioned from scenes in which they acted as deconstructed Chekhovian characters to scenes in which they became able filmmakers, switching easily between a mode of passivity as they were captured by a documentarian's gaze and a more activist, Occupy-inspired stance, donning costumes and megaphones and picking up cameras to construct a more active version of their lives. The production's temporal transversals thus queered Chekhov, Occupy, and the politics of the present.

Audiences for *Broke House* entered the world of siblings Manny, RiRi, and Olga (who lives in the attic), their friend Jerry, and two drag queen "interns" through the camerawork of David, a documentarian making a film about the house and its inhabitants. The narrative emerged as this supposed documen-

tary was simultaneously projected onto large screens above the physical structure of the house itself. As David filmed, characters directly addressed the camera to share their hopes and dreams. The large screens, positioned above the onstage action and covering the width of the stage, represented the present, and as in *Big Brother*, viewers voyeuristically witnessed backroom activity, private gestures, and hidden desires when the characters forgot the camera's presence. As with much in the "reality" genre, the documentation as preservation substituted for actual, embodied connections: "I will send you a DVD," David offers Manny in lieu of reciprocal love.

Crucially, the house doubled as a low-budget film-/web-production house, not successful enough to sustain the characters' lives as they faced eviction but allowing them to make something happen through their films. Despite its media-saturated environment, the house's materiality was undeniable: plastic sheeting and metallic thermal sheets formed walls amid a skeletal structure of wood and metal, and the space was covered with debris and littered with electrical cords and microphone stands. A crude dollar symbol (\$) appeared taped to one plastic wall, while cats made of plastic packing tape proliferated throughout the house. Entrenched



Heather Litteer (RiRi), Matthew Nasser (Jerry), and Edward Stresen-Reuter (David) in *Broke House*. (Photo: Big Art Group.)



Heather Litterer (RiRi), Matthew Nasser (Jerry), Willie Mullins (Jennifer/Intern), and Edward Stresen-Reuter (David) in *Broke House*. (Photo: Ves Pitts.)

in their excessive materiality, the characters denied the possibility of eviction, but by the end they were packing up in a powerful scene that had them taping boxes, garbage, and the house detritus to their backs.

Transposing Chekhov's characters and their longings into this materialist mediascape foregrounded parallel details between past and present. For example, Natasha's green shawl became RiRi's missing green sweater (worn by Manny); unrequited yearnings and love affairs filled both plots; and RiRi's obsession with a Nigerian internet "friend" prompted her Chekhovian lament, "I want to go to Nigeria." By evoking the familiar dramatic characters of the historical past within a densely mediated present, the production dragged its characters historically backward as they struggled to go forward, but remained, in these scenes, caught in the present.

Broke House played with queer temporalities—specifically, how bodies might act anachronistically, as Elizabeth Freeman has suggested through her notion of "temporal drag" (*Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* [2010]), to disrupt or challenge the political present. Characters in *Broke House* crossed time, questioning notions of pastness in the reformulation of Chekhov but entering a present that is uncertain of future successes. Framed by such titles as "Economy vs. Empathy," "The Derealization of Politics," and "Collapsing New Spectacle,"

the *Three Sisters* scenes documented the gradual decline of the lives of the 99 percent. However, in order to question what is possible in the present and to show how this anachronistic playfulness might take hold in a politics like Occupy, Big Art Group intercut these scenes with short in-house films made by the house's inhabitants. Between the initial run at the American Realness Festival in January 2012 and a further iteration in April 2012, the company completely reworked these inter-cut movie scenes to make them more overtly political and, as Caden Manson explained to me, more relevant to the Occupy movement (personal communication, 18 June 2012). What was at play, and perhaps at stake, in this development was a temporal shift from past to future that afforded the characters political agency and allowed them to imagine another world in which they were active participants in a fragile system.

In the production's first version, the film scenes were campy lip-synching tableaux: "Like Fassbinder in the style of Paul Verhoeven's *Showgirls*" was the direction as the intern/drag queens posed wearing large blonde wigs and high stiletto shoes. Another scene attempted "Godard in the style of *Showgirls*," merging high art with campy, cult evocations of a vacuous Vegas, symbol of so much over-the-topness and perhaps also the wealth of the 1 percent. These juxtapositions, which in the earlier version evoked a drag that dragged through time, con-

flated and queered both linear narrative and their respective film histories. In the more recent production, these scenes were replaced by a series of sci-fi battle scenes, staged under black light, with neon-highlighted, distorted, Schlemmer-esque costumes—a “sci-fi Occupy,” as Manson and Nelson refer to it (personal communication, 18 June 2012). The battle scenes recalled Chekhov’s soldiers and the military presence in *Three Sisters*, while echoing Occupy’s chaos and a frenzied hope for the future. These visually and aurally disjunctive scenes were a world unto themselves: someone put on a neon harlequin costume, another donned a Madonna-inspired pointed bra, and many in the company wore large oversized masks. The scenes culminated in a battle. With this shift in presentation, Big Art Group changed the tone from a queer politics in its previous iteration to one that more directly reflected current media-produced activism (although perhaps was no less queer than its predecessor).

The ironically titled final scene, “Accumulate,” staged the dismantling of the house. Plastic bags fluttered through the smoke-filled air; the characters were packed up and ready to move forward, but to where? Although *Broke House* was Big Art Group’s first foray into working with canonical theatrical texts, it continued the company’s transgressive and political work of questioning the systemic regulation of working lives. The set was now skeletal, down to the dead “trees” that “held up the house.” Sister Olga, represented by a moving dolly-truck, was wheeled out and all said their goodbyes as the work lights flickered and went out. The presumed outcomes from this final moment were left uncertain. The future might well be where these characters find their dreams fulfilled, sidestepping the collapse and escaping the onslaught of a rigid conservative system. Or perhaps the collapse of the house represented the confining system of the capitalist present and an ongoing search for alternate temporalities. Whatever the outcome, past, present, and future all collided in these final moments as we were left to contemplate the politics of the moment and the possibilities of the future.

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TALES OF THE CITY: A NEW MUSICAL.

Music and lyrics by Jake Shears and John Garden. Book by Jeff Whitty. Directed by Jason Moore. American Conservatory Theater, San Francisco. 16 July 2011.

THE NORMAL HEART. By Larry Kramer. Directed by Joel Grey and George C. Wolfe. The Golden Theatre, New York City. 21 May 2011.

There is a scene in the middle of the first act of the enormously appealing musical adaptation of Armistead Maupin’s *Tales of the City* where a group of out gay men, all of whom imagine themselves on the social A-list, forecast their retirement at the “Homosexual Convalescent Center” (HCC). In their minds, the HCC is a place where gay men can live sexually liberated lives as senior citizens indulging in all that San Francisco’s gay urban culture enables. Rather than retreat back into a life of repression and the closet, these men anticipate a future filled with endless orgies, hunky hustlers, and the ongoing promiscuity to which they have become accustomed. This campy and irreverent number allows the men from the ensemble to take center stage and sing about a future made possible by gay liberation. From the audience’s perspective, they are an anonymous and nearly interchangeable set of homosexuals who, as the chorus, represent the musical’s gay social world. Even the lead male character, Michael “Mouse” Tolliver, a young gay man coming into political consciousness in this milieu, initially observes them from a distance. Eventually this song of seduction does its trick and Michael and his new boyfriend Jon join the dance and witty repartee. By the end of the number, everyone shares the song’s sentiments, suggesting that we in the audience will also. The setting is San Francisco during the late 1970s, a time in the immediate aftermath of Stonewall—the modern marker for gay liberation—when the potential for gay pleasure seemed endless. This exciting new musical, written by Jeff Whitty (*Avenue Q*), with songs by Jake Shears and John Garden (of the band Scissor Sisters), and directed by Jason Moore (*Avenue Q*) beautifully captures this period without falling into the trap of nostalgia. The show is not, by any means, a jukebox musical inspired by and dependent on the soundtrack of the 1970s. The characters build foundations for their future lives, daring to imagine new forms of kinship and community without any sense of the horror of AIDS, which would begin to ravage San Francisco only a few years later. The musical presents San Francisco as a place of profound personal transformation, and the 1970s as a time of radical social change.

Tales of the City had its world premiere in San Francisco at the American Conservatory Theater, one of