



Performing a new old left: My Barbarian's The Mother

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PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Performing a new old left: My Barbarian's *The Mother*

My Barbarian performed their contribution to the 2014 Whitney Biennial, *The Mother*, adapted from a play by Brecht (adapted from a novel by Gorky), in a gallery-turned-theater just off of the first-floor lobby of the Upper East Side museum. With only what seemed to be a freestanding office partition functioning as a door, the hustle and bustle of museum shop purchases and art-world lobby gossip provided a hum of white noise throughout the performance. The scenery was sparse with one gray triangular and sloping platform as the stage. Abstractly figural masks that looked to be made out of papier-mâché newspaper hung on the walls on either side, simultaneously evoking Greek theater, commedia dell'arte, the hippie aesthetic of Bread and Puppet, and middle-school art projects. As the audience filed in, members of My Barbarian – Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexander Segade – lounged informally on the platform, dressed in an ensemble of well-fitting overalls, each outfit a different shade of beige and a slight variation on what might be called worker chic. The multiple leftist energetics of this initial mise-en-scène, aurally enmeshed in a din of art-world commerce seeping through the entryway, felt as though an anachronistic traveling political theatre was parasitically and awkwardly inhabiting the sleek institutional and financial forms of the museum. Even before the action began, the space held a disorienting mixture of criticality and complicity.

The Mother was a very loose adaptation of Brecht's 1932 play (*Die Mutter*), itself an adaptation of a 1906 novel by Maxim Gorky. Gorky's original story follows the becoming-militant of Pelagea Vlassova. As Segade sang in the performance's opening song, Vlassova is "a widow of a worker and a mother of a worker" in Russia in the years surrounding the Bolshevik revolution. It tells of Vlassova moving beyond her own seemingly private struggles and engaging with the structural politics of mothering – distributing anti-capitalist leaflets disguised in food wrappers after her revolutionary son has been arrested, becoming literate as a way to prepare for revolution, and rallying for the support of a factory strike. My Barbarian maintained the basic narrative structure of Brecht's play and Gorky's story, and yet rewrote and reimagined much of Brecht's original dialogue and formal qualities. Their approach to the play was just as much about generating newness as about re-performing and re-presenting a Brechtian theatrical work. Paradoxically, it was in these departures that *The Mother* seemed to broadly out-Brecht many career Brechtians.

The individual characters from Brecht's script were distributed among the performers – each performed the mother, her son, and other characters at various moments. In this way, the characters of the play became unstable and mutable positions that could be stepped into rather than persons with imagined interiors with whom the audience was expected to identify. The actors also performed on multiple vocal registers: sometimes in overly dramatic proclamations as if playing at playing; other times describing their own actions as if speaking from a subject position that was already outside itself; and other times disrupting the movement of the plot to break into songs written by the collective specifically for the

production and accompanied by a sparse piano track (Brecht's original production included 10 songs with music by Hanns Eisler).¹ These songs each included their share of leftist puns and ironic genre crossings, yet laced with a sense of honest commitment and vulnerable effort. They were each sung in a zone of indistinction between irony and sincerity – as if sincerely felt winks – a time-honored performance strategy referred to by Ann Pellegrini as a modality of “camp sincerity” (2007, 184).

Over the course of the play, *My Barbarian* cycled through various participatory technologies with the audience. In one scene, they requested that the entire audience play a part in the production by reading out loud en masse from a script projected on the back wall. The invitation to read collectively felt both coercive and pleasurable in its appeal to unity. The monotonous drawl of the group-speak was reminiscent of a religious service or a somber sort of political rally. In another scene they announced, “we need a volunteer to play a small Russian boy” and proceeded to bring the volunteer onstage, playing out the scene around the volunteer without actually needing them to do anything or giving them any instructions. These moments of participation felt potentially isomorphic to the forms of gathering currently circulating in contemporary leftist politics and yet off-kilter in relation to the play's anachronistic and geographically displaced content. The audience talking en masse felt both religiously political and coercively non-coercive – resonant with the pleasures and pains of the “human mic” of Occupy movements and other experimental assemblies. The audience member passively participating in something that they didn't fully understand but that others seemed to have done before evoked the complicated sensations of contemporary State-condoned protests that often feel already contained and controlled. Yet these timely forms of participation were occurring within a not-so-timely play filled with the seemingly assured and solid signifiers of early-twentieth-century left movements: Communist revolution; class struggle; proletarian uprising.

The performance was punctuated by “interruptions” – moments outside the plot that were announced by hand-drawn projections appearing on the wall behind the stage and an abrupt switch into a more casual form of direct address to the audience regarding issues in the present. The first interruption was a sort of faux press conference in which *My Barbarian* fielded questions from imagined audience members by calling on nonexistent raised hands, including the question: “Why are you doing this play?” *My Barbarian* responded by describing their desire to explore the social and symbolic registers of the politics of motherhood and a desire to participate in a renewed interest in Marxism and Communism (“Marx did predict that capitalism would destroy the earth, right?”). The second “interruption” featured a “teach-in” with Brechtian “study questions” and a “show of hands,” a moment of audience polling about the artist as teacher and the kind of precarious service labor both teaching and mothering entail. The “show of hands” began with simple prompts such as, “raise your hand if you work as a teacher, keep your hands raised if you are paid ...” and grew into more involved commands such as, “wave your hands slowly back and forth like this if you've ever worked with children who were or are poorer than you, now cry dramatically if those children were or are wealthier than you.”

The first performance of Brecht's *The Mother* took place in January of 1932 in Berlin, just one year before the revolutionary Communist energies of the time would be violently curtailed by Hitler's coming to power. Brecht wrote of *The Mother* that its “aim was to teach certain forms of political struggle to the audience. It was addressed mainly to women”

(1964, 62). My Barbarian's adaptation of the play evoked this time and these aims alongside a more contemporary assortment of queries: what does it feel like to perform the teaching of "forms of political struggle" when those forms no longer feel quite right? What does playing with 1930s leftist and feminist strategies do within the diffusions and blockages of the 2010s? How does a didactic play written for the factory floor play just off the lobby of a major art institution? What exactly is getting taught within the humor and awkwardness of My Barbarian's participatory tactics? What does the properly political of another time feel like when improperly yet earnestly re-performed in the present?

My Barbarian's production of *The Mother* ended with an original song entitled "The Chorus of the Revolutionary Workers." The song's title hung heavy with the signifiers of another time – a time when "revolutionary workers" felt like a cohesive category that could be intoned in a chorus – yet the lyrics of the song spoke to a different sort of time, politics, and sense of work: "Get up mom!/ There's so much work to do/ The party is over—/ There is cleaning to do!" With the up-tempo ostinato of the piano accompaniment beginning to play, My Barbarian told the audience to sing with them. They assured us that it was easy – the whole song was all one note and each phrase started on the downbeat. There was the same emotional, as well as historical, undecidability as elsewhere – was this funny or serious, critical or pleasurable, political, or not political? Was it 1932 or 2014, old left or new left, now or then? In a time when elections don't deliver on their promises, protests can often feel futile, and enacting a world beyond what currently exists continues to feel both crushingly difficult and absolutely necessary, My Barbarian's anachronistic leftist awkwardness was a moment to experiment with what a different approach to the political might feel like – an opportunity to practice detaching from our attachments to the stultifying political genres of the present. My Barbarian's *The Mother* was a gathering that felt like both a binding and an opening, an ongoingness together that wasn't quite sure whether it was real or fake, serious or fun, political or unpolitical, old or new.

Note

1. Some of my personal favorite musical moments included "How?," a pop folk song about revolutionary tactics sung by Gordon that arrived at a sweetly sung proposition, "make all those wealthy bastards bleed"; "In Praise of Communism," a song and dance number about the enduring promise of Communism set to a ragtime-esque piano accompaniment and performed by Gaines complete with high-school-choir-like choreography; and "The Common Cause" a late-90s-musical-theater torch song of sorts (as if out of an actually radicalized production of Jonathan Larsen's *Tick, Tick ... Boom!*) sung by Segade about the glory of a shared revolutionary cause (the "third thing") between mother and son.

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