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David Adjmi's "Marie Antoinette."

BY HILTON ALS

Marie Antoinette continues to interest us because punishment does. Born in Vienna in 1755 and executed in Paris thirty-seven years later, she has never had what one might call a dramatically evolved self. But how could she? As the penultimate child of sixteen and the eighth daughter of Queen Maria Theresa of Hungary and Bohemia, and the Holy Roman Emperor, Francis I, Marie had parents whose focus was less on child care than on politics and strategy. Maria Theresa, the only female ruler in the history of the Habsburgs, always had much on her mind, including arranging marriages for her enormous brood—marriages that would benefit the state. As a girl playing in the Schönbrunn Palace's white-and-gold halls, Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna—or Antonia, as family members referred to her—was close to one older sister, but afraid of her forbidding mother. She learned early to wear self-interest like a second skin; if she had not, she might have frozen to death, given her world's cold, material indulgence.

When Marie was a pre-adolescent, her tutor tempered her mother's belief that she was stupid and flighty; he found that the beautiful young girl was "more intelligent than has been generally supposed." But the question of Marie Antoinette's education became an issue only in 1766, when the Austro-Hungarian Habsburgs and the French Bourbons, distracted by their ancient battles, realized that they had unintentionally made room for Britain and Prussia and Russia on the European stage. Declaring a truce, the monarchs decided that King Louis XV's grandson, the young Dauphin, should marry Marie; the union would be a strong symbol of dynastic unity. The marriage didn't take place until 1770; in the interim, Maria Theresa had numerous doctors and educators go to work on the girl to improve her chances of becoming the next Dauphine. There were French lessons, and three months of dentistry, without an anesthetic, to correct her crooked teeth. There were lessons in protocol, and a new, towering French hair style to master. But, after Marie wed the Dauphin, at Versailles, there were more trials: he did not consummate their marriage for seven years. Was the Dauphin's lack of physical interest Marie's fault? Naturally, the fault would be hers—she was a woman. She was also a young girl who had been trained to impersonate a female—a royal who was versed in empty protocol, consumed by gossip, myth, and fashion. And it's this jangle of familial expectations, sexual confusion and self-doubt, cultural alienation, physical pain, and consumerism that we meet in the person of Marin Ireland, who reprises her role as the Queen of France in David Adjmi's pivotal work "Marie Antoinette" (at the SoHo Rep, directed by Rebecca Taichman).

That the piece amounts to a kind of collaboration between Adjmi and Ireland—she writes in space with her body as Adjmi's words fill the stage—is one of the production's unexpected pleasures; in our generally director-driven theatre, it's fascinating to watch a great actress assume the mantle of muse and run with it. When Ireland enters, stage right, we see her freaked-out Marie in relief against a white wall that runs the length of the shallow stage. On that wall, we see, too, that Marie's name has been carved out in white block letters—a ghastly advertisement for a useless product? Dressed in a flouncy strapless orange-red dress and shiny shoes, Marie looks tacky, but maybe her soul isn't. She acknowledges us with a smile. The young ruler's a la dauphine hairdo resembles a child's efforts to make a two-tiered cake stand up straight, but no matter—Marie's very sorry for keeping her audience waiting. Holding herself with great awkwardness—she's round-shouldered, like a young girl who thinks her breasts are too big to be fashionable—Marie makes her way to her ladies-in-waiting: Yolande de Polignac (Marsha Stephanie Blake) and Thérèse de Lamballe (Jennifer Ikeda). The ladies wear brown satin dresses that resemble coffin lining; their French hauteur is more chilling than death. A slide on the wall: "1776." It fades. Then:

POLIGNAC (pouring): Tea?
MARIE: Thanks. I'll have a spot. Oh, my God, I'm picking up British affectations. "I'll have a spot."
LAMBAULLE: And look what's happening in the colonies.
MARIE: Boston, I know.
POLIGNAC: Bedlam.
MARIE: It's busy, and all for a spot of tea.

Right off, we know that Adjmi's Marie isn't Marie; her language isn't in the tradition of stage royals, particularly as imagined by American actors performing "the classics." Rather, we're in something more modern—in movie territory, actually, and Adjmi's Marie is feeding off the machinations of mean girls by being "stupid," and thus not a threat. Speaking about historical events in a vernacular voice is nothing new—think Brecht's "Life of Galileo"—but Adjmi's brilliance is to use trashy vernacular speech to allude to the way historytrashes us. Marie's style of speech is based on pop fashion—namely, the flat-voiced sounds that Paris Hilton and Nicole Richie recorded in a thousand television interviews—and aren't they already being forgotten?

Part of what made Sofia Coppola's...
2006 film “Marie Antoinette” so charming was Kirsten Dunst’s bloom of a face, blushing with the pleasure of being alive. Ireland, on the other hand, is thin, deracinated, hysteric with fatigue but unable to rest, to stop talking, to not try and control the Dauphin, her equally self-absorbed, infantile husband (Steven Rattazzi, who is comic and emotionally transparent in the role).

Adjmi tells the story of Marie’s fall year by year, and the play concludes with her execution. Before that, we watch with an increasing taste of dread, as her husband becomes an ever more ineffectual king. We’re not comforted by Marie’s welcoming suitor, either. (As the Swedish Army officer Axel Fersen, whom Marie doesn’t necessarily fall in love with but certainly romanticizes, Chris Stack is menacingly attractive.) What we fear is not so much the inexorability of history (which can be as blank or as rich in projections as the stage’s white walls) as Marie’s history of being consumed by her own need to consume—a blindness that makes her act on impulse. When it comes to men, she’s a sloppy obsessive, a male-object fetishist. But, unlike many fetishists, Marie, lousy with all kinds of repression, doesn’t recognize the truth of how and why she ends up making love to be controlled even as she longs for someone to control her. That would take some thought, and thought begins with what she has so little of: self-reflection. After her marriage is consummated and she finally has her career baby, Marie is impatient with him, too. He’s taking up too much emotional room.

Stretching her arms wide, or balling her hands in a fist as the people of France complain more and more about her excesses—did she really run a game on a cardinal to acquire a diamond necklace that once belonged to her father-in-law’s mistress, Mme. du Barry?—and revolution brews, Ireland further taps into the anger that can be found in Marie’s shrillness. She’s a prisoner of history, too. But Ireland doesn’t use Marie’s anger as the “reason” for her unpleasantness; it’s just another note in Marie’s long song of supersonic screaming, the temper tantrums she throws, because, as a spoiled and neglected child, she feels continually forsaken. Marie wants someone to take her in hand and tell her when to shut up and go to bed.

That’s when we understand that Adjmi’s overriding theme is power, and that “Marie Antoinette” is an examination of how the sadomasochistic impulse is born. If you do not know who you are, you look for someone to tell you over and over again. (When Marie is arrested, her hair shorn by a handsome revolutionary—solidly played by Will Pullen—you can’t get past the sense that having her power taken away relieves her.) Still, Adjmi is no Jean Genet; that is, he’s not a moralist but a compassionate satirist. Without that interest, he couldn’t have created this Marie, who lives for male authority but is too spaced to absorb it, and who’s constantly pissed, because she doesn’t think she’s had her fair share of it at all.

Rebecca Taichman’s direction doesn’t get in Adjmi’s or Ireland’s way, but it doesn’t help, either. Yes, yes, it’s obvious that Taichman is dishing up a little Brecht as the ninety-odd-minute piece moves along—actors help other actors dress or undress, move sets around, whatever—but that’s textbook directing; Taichman shows us what we already know, including the Wooster Group-inspired dances that sometimes separate scenes. It’s as if the script’s imaginativeness exhausted or closed off Taichman’s. Adjmi is enthralled by and suspicious of the surreality of women’s lives. (In this he resembles artists as diverse as Luis Buñuel and Rainer Werner Fassbinder. Adjmi’s 2009 play, “Striking,” begins with a number of Syrian women discussing their friends; the conversation overlaps as one of them literally pulls off bits of her sultan—she doesn’t want to be mistaken for a colored person.) In the middle of the play, for instance, Marie moves, for a time, to Le Harneu, her country retreat. There she meets a sheep (sensitively rendered by David Greenspan, who brings an insidious shadowiness to the part), who warns her that she must change her ways or lose her life. Is Adjmi’s lamb Jesus or one of his lost lambs? Whatever he is, Marie is charmed by him; she’s interested not in his advice but in how he amuses her. A talking sheep—imagine. He baas and Marie responds about this and that: the simplicity of nature, having her goats and other livestock perfumed because she doesn’t like rustic smells. She’s completely unmindful of the fact that Greenspan’s sheep is the chastening, punishing voice we listen for to pull us back from the glamour of excess, its glittering prizes, its various deaths. ♦