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that two contrasting positions—the complete liberation of the body, and ironic distance from such optimism—were not seen as mutually exclusive; gleeful escapism could also serve as political commentary. *Untitled Feminist Show* magnificently enjoyed the best of both worlds.

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**SONTAG: REBORN.** Based on the book by Susan Sontag and edited by David Rieff. Adapted by Moe Angelos. Directed by Marianne Weems. The Builders Association, Under the Radar Festival, The Public Theater, New York City. 9 January 2012.

**YOU, MY MOTHER.** By Karinne Keithley Syers and Kristen Kosmas. Music by Brendan Connelly and Rick Burkhardt. Directed by Brooke O’Harra. The Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf, La MaMa E.T.C., New York City. 11 February 2012.

As debates about women’s reproductive rights and domestic responsibilities resurface in US politics and culture, many downtown theatre companies in New York City are making works that embody the ways in which, even years after the women’s liberation movement, the personal is still very much political. Whereas in the early 2000s, many downtown groups seemed more interested in aesthetics than politics, in recent years, several new groups have been creating overtly feminist performance and some older groups have been grappling with feminist issues in a more explicit fashion. Evidencing this shift, two established groups, the Builders Association and the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf, presented new work in early 2012 that significantly departed from the companies’ usual fare. *Sontag: Reborn*, a masterful one-woman performance of Sontag’s early journals, and *You, My Mother*, a duo of poignant chamber operas exploring the relationship of adult children to their mothers, both staged archives of women’s lives, calling attention to the private, the domestic, the everyday occurrences that comprise lives extraordinary and ordinary. By demonstrating that the small and intimate details of women’s lives are worthy of examination through large and ambitious productions, and by depicting women wrestling with domestic responsibilities and career ambitions, with ideals of motherhood and its realities, both these pieces performed feminist historiography, excavations of the personal as political statement.

In past productions including *Alladeen* (2002), *Super Vision* (2005), and *Continuous City* (2007), the Builders Association used sophisticated onstage technology to explore grand themes like globalization, surveillance, and the digitization of society. In *Sontag: Reborn*, however, Austin Switzer’s video design, although impressive, supported rather than overshadowed Moe Angelos’s insightful live performance, and attempts at sweeping commentary were replaced with subject matter smaller in scope. The text of the piece was adapted by Angelos from *Reborn*, an edited collection of Sontag’s journals and notebooks written between 1947 and 1963. Like the book, the performance traced Sontag’s life from age 15 to 30, from her parents’ home to college to Europe, through marriage and motherhood, from her reluctant acknowledgment of her “lesbian tendencies” to her fraught relationship with a woman she refers to as “H.” Directed by Marianne Weems, Angelos gave a performance that captured the youthful energy of Sontag’s words and embodied them with nuance and compassion, creating a moving and tender portrait. Sitting at a desk piled with books and situated behind a scrim at the Public Theater, Angelos as Sontag allowed the audience to witness the formation of a great mind, the self-fashioning of a woman who would become an acclaimed public intellectual. Choosing to stage the early journals rather than to focus on Sontag’s later career, the Builders Association suggested that private struggles matter as much as public success.

Instead of contributing to the piece’s overall critique, as in other Builders Association shows, the video design in *Sontag: Reborn* simply illustrated Sontag’s words: a projected map traced her route on her night out and an image of the writer Thomas Mann appeared when she described visiting his home. Animation technology was put to magical use when glowing text appeared across notebooks (filmed live from above) in which Sontag wrote at her desk. Projected onto the scrim at the front of the stage, the words shifted, overlapped, and scrolled, sometimes covering the entire performance area. The Newman space at the Public Theater was quite large for such an intimate performance, and the video design helped to magnify Sontag’s personal musings, bridging the distance between audience and onstage action and projecting the private into the public.

The video projections created a temporal frame for the piece. The show opened with the sound of puffing on a cigarette, as an image of an older version of Sontag, played by Angelos with the iconic white-streaked long hair, came into view on the scrim. The projected Sontag, sometimes paging through a notebook, served as a narrator, providing dates and brief explanations to the audience, and



Moe Angelos as Susan Sontag, younger and elder, in *Sontag: Reborn*. (Photo: James Gibbs.)

offering commentary—sometimes archly, at other times sweetly—on her early earnestness. The text for these interjections was gathered from marginalia that Sontag added to the notebooks years after they were written, and their inclusion shifted the stage action from present to past tense. The performance was memory; the older Sontag conjured the image of her younger self as she reread her journals. The image remained projected there throughout the piece, emphasizing the tension between the Sontag of these early journals, self-conscious and driven, and her established public persona. Angelos's performance revealed Sontag striving, fumbling, and falling short of her imagined self, which endeared the young Sontag to the audience, inviting us to sympathize with her negotiation of identity and the sacrifices she made in her pursuit of knowledge and experience.

One of the most pleasurable moments of the performance addressed a night out in San Francisco in 1949. Sontag's text describes hopping from bar to bar with H, learning that the beautiful woman performing at Mona's was actually a man in drag and marveling at the attractive waitresses wearing men's clothes. She and H danced awkwardly, Sontag recalls, and she felt stiff when H kissed her

later that night as they lay side by side on a narrow cot. But, Sontag recounts, as they made love, she found a beautiful release from her long-held anxiety about her sexuality. The experience of the weekend made her feel reborn, like she was "an entirely different person."

Staging this journal entry, the Builders Association performed an archive of pre-Stonewall lesbian experience, a testament to the difficulty women had reconciling 1950s-era demands with their own desires. Although Sontag herself had an uneasy relationship to feminism, *Sontag: Reborn* was a piece of feminist theatre. The journals chronicle the experiences of a woman who sacrificed the trappings of conventional feminine behavior—heterosexual marriage, motherhood, and domesticity—to assert herself within the intellectual discourse of her time. The Builders Association production of these private struggles was a feminist act.

*You, My Mother* by the Theatre of a Two-Headed Calf (2HC) also marked a turn for the company. The company's previous work has consisted largely of interpretations of classical texts—for example, three plays by Stanislaw Witkiewicz (2001–03), Shaw's *Major Barbara* (2005), and Chikamatsu Monzaemon's

*The Drum of the Wave of Horikawa* (2007). Their production of Susan Glaspell's proto-feminist *Trifles* (2010) sparked the company's interest in the domestic, and *You, My Mother*, appropriately presented at La MaMa E.T.C., continued that trajectory, emphasizing the small moments in our histories that shape our relationships with our mothers in adulthood.

Directed by company cofounder Brooke O'Harra, the production was the group's first collaboration to feature the work of contemporary playwrights, as well as the first to start from a musical rather than a textual idea. Karinne Keithley Syers and Kristen Kosmas worked with two experimental composers, 2HC's cofounder Brendan Connelly and Rick Burkhardt (*Three Pianos*), respectively, on their pieces. With poetic libretti that were evocative rather than narrative, and with complex, difficult music, the resulting piece was an elegiac meditation on both childhood and motherhood. Like the Builders Association with *Sontag: Reborn*, with *You, My Mother*, 2HC exchanged the sophisticated technology they have used in the past for old-fashioned slide projectors (projection design by Ahram Jeong and Yoonkyung Lim) and three standing screens that conjured images of watching home movies and highlighted the idea of personal history as performance. Members of the new music ensemble Yarn/Wire were situated around the playing area, their instruments, including an enormous marimba and vibraphone, contributing to a simple *mise en scène* that focused the audience's attention on the intimate stories being told rather than on stage spectacle.

The cast, comprised of vocalists Beth Griffith and Kate Soper and 2HC regulars Laryssa Husiak and Mike Mikos, balanced 2HC's signature alienated performance style with emotionality, embodying the conflicting feelings inherent in the relationships they presented onstage. The actors all spoke and sang and sometimes contributed musical accompaniment. Likewise, the musicians were integrated into the performance, sometimes speaking text or changing the course of the stage action by demanding that the actors perform a "cruel scene."

Just as *Sontag: Reborn* was framed as a kind of reading back by the elder Sontag, *You, My Mother* felt like memory, like rummaging through a series of snapshots, some of which are fading, blurred, or misidentified. Kosmas staged this idea beautifully in her piece, with a slide show that contained no images, only parenthetical captions such as "(your father my grandfather)," "(your mother my grandmother)," "(party of some kind)," "(wedding of someone)," "(architecture)." Burkhardt's score—comprised of percussive bangs, haunting trills on the keyboards, and eerie shrieks of the strings—evoked feelings of fear, frustration, and confusion. The per-

formers spoke Kosmas's text over the discordant musical accompaniment, intoning some words on long notes, stuttering others, and dropping syllables—literalizing a breakdown in communication between mothers and children.

Connelly's composition included long, bright chords over which the performers sang Syers's text, which was rich with animal imagery, in snippets of gorgeous melody. In one section, Griffith sang triumphantly "I am your mother / I may have lost our money and sold your grandfather's watches but / I am your mother / I put you in a car and took you around the entire country because you should see a country you are born to" as she stood over the sleeping body of her son, played by Mikos. He awoke and, sitting on the floor, performed a monologue describing his experience of the family's aforementioned road trip, while the daughters (Soper and Husiak) repeated "Disappointment / Disappointment / Disappointment" in the shadows upstage, their refrain potentially reproaching either or both mother and child. The scene archived and, in some ways, celebrated a mother's well-meaning attempt to give her children a singular life experience, despite any discrepancy between her actions' intentions and their effects.

Throughout both parts of the opera, the children, who are now adults reflecting back, try to make sense of their mother's choices, to forgive her shortcomings in light of her successes. For example, in Kosmas's part of the opera, violinist Joshua Modney declaimed "On the one hand, you were gluing fabric to Styrofoam / On the other hand, you were reading *The Second Sex* / On the one hand, you couldn't be bothered to chop a vegetable / On the other hand, you put your children through college" between violent strokes and plucks on his instrument. Griffith, as the mother, responded with her own chorus, archiving her labor and that of the



Beth Griffith, Laryssa Husiak, Joshua Modney, and Mariel Roberts in *You, My Mother*.  
(Photo: Prudence Katze.)

women of her generation. She alternated between shouting and coloratura: "Someone has to fight for reproductive rights / And someone has got to carry on six or seven wild affairs simultaneously with completely inappropriate men. . . . Someone has got to wear the first pair of pants so that you may enjoy your liberated lifestyle / Someone has got to do these things."

*You, My Mother* reminded us that it is not just famous mothers like Sontag who faced the difficult choices between domestic responsibilities and responsibility to herself, but that all mothers had to do things that required compromise and sacrifice. Both *Sontag: Reborn* and *You, My Mother* took the deeply personal and often ordinary details of women's lives and transformed them into intimate performance texts. Although both pieces presented themes seemingly more modest in scope than the work the companies have presented in the past, they were remarkable for their statement that these smaller stories deserve exploring and archiving. These performances, simultaneously sad and celebratory, marked a feminist start to 2012's downtown performance season.

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**DIGITAL: A LOVE STORY; BULLY; GRAND THEFT AUTO IV; PORTAL; DYS4IA.** By, respectively, Christine Love; Rockstar Games (2); Valve Corporation; Anna Anthropy.

Theatre and videogaming share important, although often unacknowledged, similarities. Both employ constructions of identification and representation that inform and are informed by codes of racialization, gender, and sexuality; both rely upon live audiences for immediate feedback, input, and engagement; both stage narrative and action into scenes and *mise en scène*; and both offer characters that can improvise within a dynamic script. Even character itself is similarly constructed in theatre and gaming. In gaming, the "protagonist" refers to both the character role within the game and, by extension, the gamer. Likewise, in theatre, the character is both scripted within the text and is an embodied instantiation; the actor is a version of the character. While gaming action is not embodied in the traditional sense, the software capabilities of choreography and gesture represent the embodied; further, they encourage experiential relations through affect and desire, integrating the user's bodily responses into the game design. As in theatre, games stage iden-

tity reconfigurations through character and events that sometimes infer and sometimes overdetermine identifying processes concerning codes of gender and sexuality. Insofar as games can provide alternative/trans-/subcultural formations of identity, they invite both queer players and queer theorists to participate in their virtual worlds.

Questions of identity occupy the discursive core of "cyber" selves and videogames. Where does the gamer end and the game's script begin? To what degree do the actions of the gamer influence the identity of the avatar or character? What might it mean for a male gamer to "play" a female avatar, when the conflated "I" signifies both? For more than a decade, queer performance artists have explored the relations between gaming and performance to probe techno-mediated formations of identity as found in works like Kate Bornstein's *Virtually Yours* (1994) and Micha Cárdenas's recent *Becoming Dragon* and *Becoming Transreal* (2010). These particular performances, among others, enact the interplay of reconstructed bodies in relation to virtual technologies and digital archives; in so doing, they relay social processes and potentialities of identification within given frameworks. Because of their potential for creating alternative versions of gender and sexual practice, a "gayming" subculture has emerged, organized around queer themes in games, complete with its own convention in San Francisco (GaymerCon). At present, however, much queer performance theory has neglected to fully consider this new medium. Queer performance theories consider nonnormative identifications, experiences, and embodiments, yet persist as underutilized perspectives on gaming and related social trajectories. The following examples illustrate what gayming offers to the field.

Christine Love's *Digital: A Love Story* (2010) exemplifies how game scripts can problematize notions of identity, a modality typically reserved for live performance. The story never alludes to the protagonist's gender, sexual, or racial affiliation: its protagonist is marked only by English literacy, having access to a computer in the "first five minutes of 1988," and a knack for hacking into different servers. Hacking involves receiving stolen long-distance calling-card codes to connect to message boards of a different area code, and using a "dictionary hacker" algorithm to test possible passwords to gain full access (reading and posting privileges). *Digital* employs bulletin-board-system (BBS) forums as the primary sites of action, which take place against the backdrop of a now antiquated computer desktop. The narrative depends on the sending and receiving of e-mail; while the gamer never knows what she sends, received messages accumulate into an archive. To approximate historical accuracy, the protagonist dials via modem each time she wishes