

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

An Intimate Unity

Fulya Peker's *The Plague*

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Unity

Plague

by Nicholas Birns

Hyperion 2

Written and Directed by Fulya Peker

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Theater for the New City (Cino Theater), NYC

When I attended the opening performance of Fulya Peker's *Plague* on September 16, the theater opened slightly late; finally, the announcement was made that we were free to go in. To do so, one had to step over a prone figure on the ground, a bald man caked in mud, a kind of combination of hobo and primordial Adam. This not only burst the bounds of the proscenium but also indicated the way this performance would present not just a spectacle but an anthropology. Instead of merely watching humans 'act,' we were to be confronted anew with speculations on the very nature of humanity. The actor eventually entered the stage and assumed a contemplative pose, now seeming more Bodhisattva than bum.

As I ascended the stairs to my chosen, slightly peripherally located seat, I stepped over what I thought was a bulky brown rug spreading out from the stage to the audience stalls. I stepped over it rather authoritatively, in a way that if I had missed a step would have clamped down on the 'rug' rather hard. After a point, I realized that in fact the bulkiness of the rug was caused by there being a human being inside it! I had almost crushed one of the actors! Again, more important than the standard Brechtian alienation effect is the total lack of distinction between the substance of the piece and its articulation. This might seem too comfortably organic were it not for the overriding metaphor of the plague. The very phrase "communicable disease" suggests how plagues can carry information that is also destruction, that their ability to penetrate past barriers means that the sort of structural interchangeability betoken here is not just a lark or a passport to beatific infinitude.

The action of the piece took place against the background of a central raised panel covered by a fluted black curtain. In the back of it to the right was a series of small white river rocks strewn on the ground. The elemental colors of black and white provided a stark tableau; they provided, though, less a foundation for the work than a grammar of it, in the same way that the precise and immediate verbal relationships of the vowels and consonants in the words were mirrored by the gestures of the actors. A robed figure in black (assuming a white robe by the end of the play) stood in the middle, speaking most of the language of the play and speaking as its *raisonneur*. He was flanked

most impressively by two black-clothed caryatid-like figures who maintained an architectural poise for nearly an hour. In back, a rustling, implication-filled tympani is heard as, from stage center left, a relentless pilot light bores into the audience, signifying, perhaps, the dualities, the ambiguities, of enlightenment.

One of the astonishing aspects of *The Plague* was how elastic the four male actors managed to make their bodies, seeming stoic at times, invulnerable at others, sometimes seeming very virile, sometimes more gender-indeterminate, sometimes vigorously tall, sometimes prone on the ground. They could seem Neanderthals at one moment; robots the next; living, breathing contemporaries at another instance. Again, the sense of the anthropological seen at the very beginning returned, as body and utterance were both being examined for a kind of bedrock, core humanity, about which yet no crippling essentialist assumptions were being made. The sense of body as, again, not just base about mediation fortified the sense of permeation that the piece's ruling metaphors, plague and the verbal interstices of languages, very much paraded.

Using very simple words—including many monosyllables—constrained by the need to have rhyme and assonance in as much of the enunciated language as possible, *The Plague* nonetheless makes a concerted historiographic argument. Most take it is a mere coincidence that the Black Death occurred near the end of the Middle Ages as commonly conceived, that, e.g., the quintessentially medieval Dante wrote before it, the quintessentially Renaissance Boccaccio wrote largely after it (and, famously of it). Peker argues here that the plague never totally ended, that its external aspects came to an end but not its internal. (This of course is relevant to the nature of event in general; how can one observe the anniversary of 9/11 if the events of 9/11 have in some way not stopped happening?) Even after the physical disease had vanished, the plague of reason remained, internalized, manifested in Cartesian dualism and in the reign of unthinking rationality. “The most terrible plague is one that does not reveal its symptoms.” Modernity has been trapped by a plague endemic to its very conception. Of course, Peker is saying no more than many modern critics of modernity such as Nietzsche, Foucault, and Adorno, but to dramatize it so intricately, so implicitly, and so *considering the nature of her argument* non-argumentatively is not only a considerable feat but a moving one. Peker's thesis could be potentially stentorian or monolithic, but her dramatic rendition of it forestalls these declensions; having established a past (the literal plague) and a present (a metaphorical plague of reason), Peker then looks to the future. One of the great assets of Peker's work is that it utterly lacks the curdled irony, cloying self-awareness, and naïve cynicism so often found in contemporary New York performance. Jettisoning the post-collegiate smugness of much of the predominant consensus, Peker is after a more serious art and is not afraid to flaunt artistic determination that, in its

dignity and fierce ardor, will cause envy and resentment in the cynical. (In this light, the setting in the Theater for the New City reminded me of the work of the late Jeanette Arnone-K, whose paintings and murals, often exhibited there, in their bravest moments challenged an otherwise regnant bourgeois consensus in the urgency with which they registered ecological peril). Peker points out the sterility of reason, how what we think has been deliverance is in fact disease, what we think salvific is in fact moribund. Yet Peker is not writing from a sense of medievalist lament, a Henry Adams-like sense that the Virgin was superior to the Dynamo; she also avoids any kind of hortatory suggestion of a revolution in life, whether through political or sexual revitalization—vulgar-Marxist, vulgar-Freudian, and vulgar-Nietzsche. Her high seriousness and her use of innovative techniques to render issues of artistic gravity hearken back to modernism, but Peker is too postmodern to proffer any kind of positive agenda. Or is she not? It struck me towards the end that *The Plague* was proposing a solution, and that was through its own medium—of theatricality, and, more important, of language.

Peker has worked a lot with Richard Foreman of the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, and the enigmatic lyricism of *The Plague* was reminiscent of Foreman, as was the rigor and discipline to which the actors had so creatively submitted themselves. Foreman, at least in his work of the past 20 years, seems to want to deliberately foil any pattern in his plays, particularly any overall import to the utterances and ejaculations made by the actors in the course of their performances. Peker, on the other hand, renders a kind of tone poem, playing on inherent resemblances in language like that between “once” and “was,” on the (to use a word sounded in the piece) “tectonic” possibilities of language. Yet the sword is double-edged. The play’s text uses rhyme, yet the introduction of rhyme into European languages was, the play hints, part of our falling into verbal imprisonment. The play celebrates the resources of language in its own right, “words alone” as Yeats famously put it. And yet language is “the problem,” verbs wriggling free from their moorings in nouns create sterile puzzlement; the same elemental language whose bare resources are so pleasing in their enunciation here also holds us in thrall. Peker, originally from Turkey, is not a native speaker of English, and this pertains to *The Plague* both because it makes her experiments with language not just playful but philological, in the manner of an Auerbach or a Spitzer (who famously went the other way with respect to Turkey), or ascetic, in the manner of a Beckett, and because not being a native speaker robs Peker of a base that for a native speaker might make such an elemental iteration a safe harbor, a reassurance. Peker can seek or find no reassurance in the fundamentals; rather, for her, they illuminate the hope and peril of the very condition of our understanding.

In the program notes, Peker adduced high-modernist precursors such as Artaud and Grotowski, and, again, it is refreshing, considering the narcissistic

snickering that so often assumes the stage in New York today, that these great artists are being taken seriously. Yet, watching *The Plague*, I thought less of these European precursors than Ralph Waldo Emerson—the Emerson who said, in “Nature,”

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Each creature is only a modification of the other; the likeness in them is more than the difference, and their radical law is one and the same. A rule of one art, or a law of one organization, holds true throughout nature. So intimate is this Unity, that, it is easily seen, it lies under the undermost garment of nature, and betrays its source in Universal Spirit. For, it pervades Thought also. Every universal truth that we express in words implies or supposes every other truth.

Peker, in linking the articulation of language and the movement of performers so intimately, in sounding the innards of a tongue she also thinks holds us in chains, is faithful to the intricacy and brutal duality of Emerson’s conception. As I exited the theater—unobstructed this time by prone bodies or human rugs—I felt a pervasive sense of possibility and excitement. This was not because I had been temporarily infused with sophomore naïveté. As Peker and Emerson instruct us, all our truths and pains are intimately bound, and we can only hope to think outside of them if we understand how thoroughly and delicately we are sutured. Peker’s elegant, forceful, and stunning play offers, in its stark, austere tableau, a glimpse of how this might be attempted.

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