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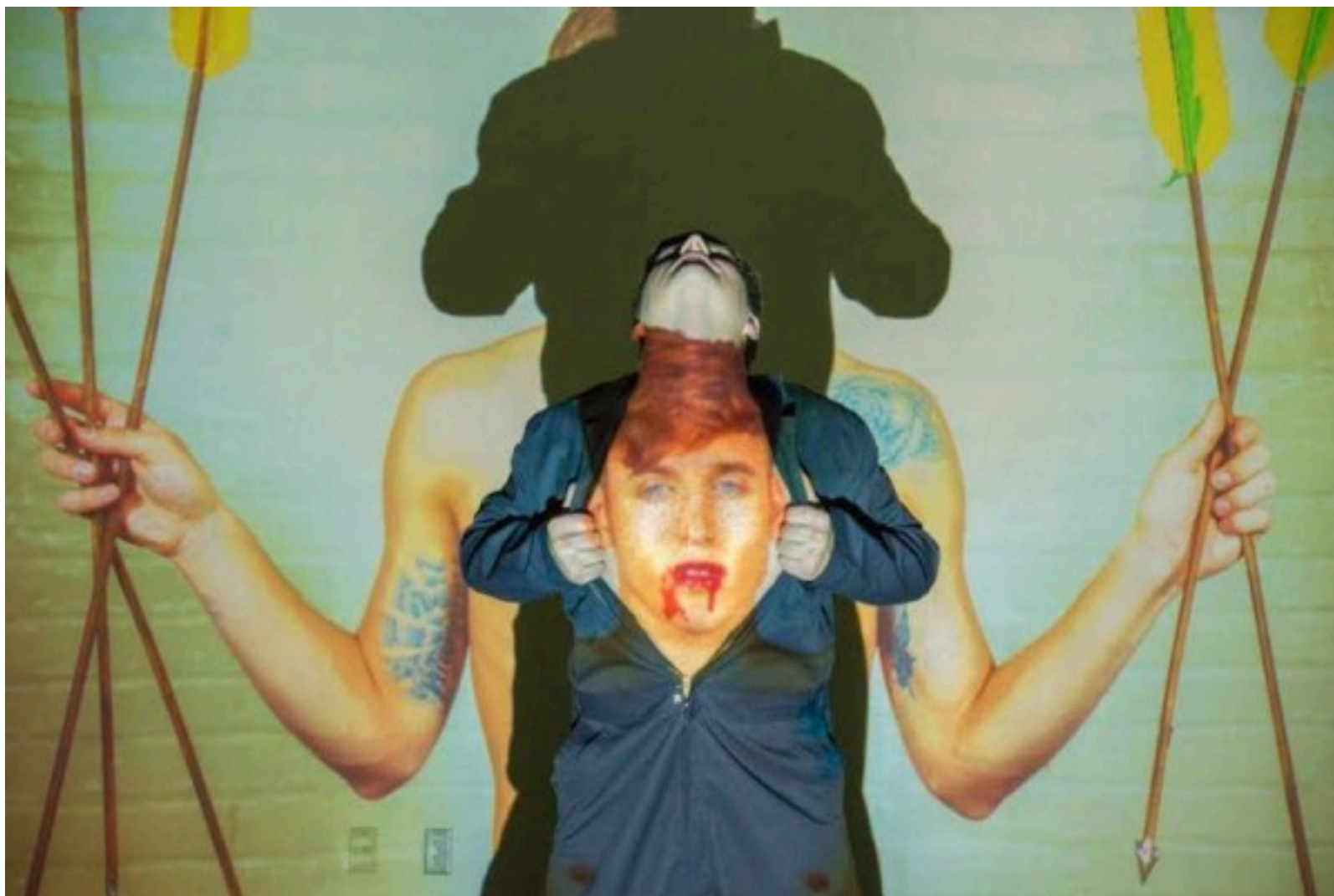
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To Create a New Kind of Flower

By **Duska Radosavljevic** (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/author/duska-radosavljevic/>)

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New York theatremaker Caridad Svich on ideas of liveness, the difference between US and European theatre cultures, and her performative response to the work of Derek Jarman.



New York-based, Philadelphia-born, Caridad Svich is easily one of the most prolific and most versatile writers one is likely to come across. Her personal website lists an impressive 24 fully produced plays, 23 published scripts, two volumes of translations and six volumes of editorial work. A complex cultural background – US/ Cuban/Argentinian/ Spanish/ Croatian – has also given her a curiosity and an ability to cover a wide range of topics, although, if at all possible to characterize her work, one might highlight an interest in strong women and Latino contexts and issues. In addition to her original plays (*12 Ophelias*, *Archipelago*, *Prodigal Kiss*), Caridad has authored notable theatre versions of Allende's *The House of Spirits* and Marquez's *Love in the Time of Cholera*, among others. Caridad engages in editorial and advocacy work for writers, and while being a member of many distinguished organizations she is also the founder of NoPassport international theatre alliance and press. She won the OBIE Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012.

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Duška Radosavljević: How did this piece about Derek Jarman come about? And how did the collaboration with director/performer John Moletress on this project occur?



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Caridad Svich: I came across Derek Jarman's work when I was in college. The first film of his I saw was *The Last of England*. I had no idea that film could do that/be that – the work was so personal, mysterious, bold, out of the ordinary. It really changed how I thought about form and narrativity. I was writing plays already but hadn't really taken stock for myself that that was what I wanted to do in the theatre. So, you could say that seeing Jarman's work occurred at a fairly formative stage in my process and journey as a writer. I saw *Edward II* and *Caravaggio* shortly after and then, experienced *Blue* twice. Slowly I caught up with his other works and writings. He's always been an influence though I've not talked about it much before.

Early last spring director John Moletress and I were working on a reading in New York City for the Gun Control Theatre Action I initiated through NoPassport theatre alliance and press, and spoke about how we wanted to work together again on a project. John and I had originally met when he staged the premiere of my play about the cult of celebrity and the visual arts world *Magnificent Waste* for Factory 449 theatre company in Washington D.C. John said he had just staged a Falk Richter piece with his ensemble force/collision and that the project *Trust Me* was huge and he was in the mood for making something that could be portable – that could, in essence, tour – and that he was interested in a piece that might have something to do with art-making. He mentioned some possible subjects, and in the middle of the conversation I said “Well, I love Derek Jarman's work, and it seems as if nobody really talks about his work anymore – not even in queer art circles in the US, anyway – and that makes me terribly sad because he was a major filmmaker.” John looked at me and said “He's my favorite artist.” So, kismet! We shook hands, and I said, I will write something and we shall see what comes of it all.

DR: How does the piece sit within your oeuvre so far?

CS: In the past year and a half, my work as a writer for live performance has become much more stripped down formally and at one and the same more open on the page. The exploration stems in part from a long-standing interest in exploring the poetics of the stage, and in creating work that is structured in movements rather than acts, spells rather than scenes, and so forth. Much of the investigation and writing has grown out of a two-fold desire: 1) to return to some notions I had about theatre-making when I first started writing for the stage – notions to do with figures and voices as opposed to working with set characters, with the role of the audience and the potential intimacy of engagement that a performance can create, with making work that reveals itself in layers, not always in linear fashion, and allows for a rather direct yet also private relationship between performer and text and 2) to deepen the kind of work I have been doing for the last ten years with mediation in performance and considerations of liveness.

JARMAN (all this maddening beauty) follows three prior pieces – *Archipelago*, *40 Ounces of Sand*, *The Hour of All Things* – also written last year – that push at the form in different ways, but that all run counter to expectations of what a play play need be. The discussion around new writing in the UK may not be as entrenched in regard to whether a playwright should write a play play or not (and what I mean by a play play is one that, you know, has a realistic set of sorts, identifiable, psychologically-based characters and relationships, rising action, and such) but in the US, it seems to be an endless one where gatekeepers at theatres set the play play standards quite high and are less able to handle plays that are not play plays.

Now, there are exceptions. Singular ones, though, by and large. Especially in the field of new writing for theatre. If you say you are writing for performance, then the so-called “rules” change in a big way. But if you’re someone like me, who has a foot in both worlds as a writer, it can get tricky. So, part of the dive back into responding to Jarman’s impact has had for me personally as a writer as much to do with touching ground with the profound influence/impact of his work as well as looking once again at the challenge he set for work to come, especially in terms of the pursuit of a singular vision artistically, and a poetic approach to word and image. Much of the work I have been making in the last year and a half – already have six more new plays written this year alone, all due to this kind of release the floodgates moment that occurred last spring – is also indebted to an abiding interest in dance-theatre and physical theatre.



(<http://www.bit.ly/kickedpigs>)

I mean, I’m part of a generation that grew up watching Pina Bausch and Robert Lepage’s works, when they toured. I’m an ardent fan of Frantic Assembly and DV8. Being

an artist-audience member for performances of these artists’ works is part of my “memory bank” as a theatre-maker. For the last several years I have been telling friends in the field that I want to make work that is text-movement-based somehow. I work with text. That’s my strength. But I also am interested in texts that leave spaces and/or makes spaces for dance, movement, specific choreographed gestural worlds. Not as a gimmick, but as an integral part of the piece’s vocabulary. So, while I was writing JARMAN (all this maddening beauty), all of this was running through my mind. The piece is part of a journey, one I am very much still on. But it also sits at the center of the journey as well.



JARMAN (all this maddening beauty) Photo: David Dowling

DR: What did the process of working with force/collision entail?

CS: I know some of force/collision’s work, and have a strong sense of John’s aesthetic lean as a theatre-maker. We had worked together before after all. We have an artistic affinity. But what I hadn’t planned on was that the piece would be essentially a solo piece. When we chatted early on, as I was about to go away and write, about what the piece might be, John

expressed that it would be ideal if it was a solo piece, because it would make it much easier to tour. I had just finished writing a solo piece *The Hour of All Things*, so I was already in that kind of direct performer to audience relationship in mind.

So, as I crafted *JARMAN (all this maddening beauty)*, I kept this in mind, whilst at same time not limiting myself. There are three distinct voices in the text (and a fourth that slips in on occasion), but they are all embodied by the performer. There is also a mediated component, although the script is wide open as to how and where mediation might occur, unlike some of my other works, where I script in the mediated visual text. A script is a score for performance, but it is also an invitation to play, and I wanted to make the invitation here quite evocative. I mean, John has worked with me before. He's read other works of mine. He's seen productions of my work, including *The House of the Spirits* (based on Isabel Allende's novel) at GALA Hispanic Theatre in Washington D.C. where I worked with frequent collaborators director Jose Zayas and projection/video designer Alex Koch. There is a great deal of scripted mediation called for in *The House of the Spirits*, as well as in *Magnificent Waste*, which John directed. As a writer, I felt that with *JARMAN (all this maddening beauty)* I was already writing a piece about a visual artist. There's already, in other words, a data bank, as it were, of images that one associates with Jarman's work. I felt that my job was to craft something else. To paint new images with words that play in response to the existing images we have in our collective or semi-collective memory of Jarman's body of work.

Although I reference *Sebastiane*, *The Last of England*, *Jubilee*, and *Blue* (with a nod to other films) in the piece, the play is not a biopic at all. That's one thing I wanted to be very clear about with John when we started working. It is a response. A poetic evocation. It is about a young artist locating himself within a legacy of queer art and coming to terms with that. So, although Derek Jarman is a figure in the text, the filter's always through the young artist's lens. The piece is constantly playing with lenses, in effect. How do we see? What do we see when we see in the seeing eye of the theatre? What do we reflect? Why? Who owns the gaze? Who can disrupt the gaze?

I purposefully chose NOT to quote from Derek Jarman's own writings in my text also for this reason. Because it is an evocation, a love letter at times, a re-creation of a moment past in the now. It is also a kind of conjuring: a piece that opens its petals, one by one, to create a new kind of flower, as it were.

That John Moletress directed the piece is a given. That was the initial agreement between us. After I wrote the first draft, John said to me that he wanted to perform it as well. I think the process for John with this project has been quite intense. He staged a workshop production in April 2014 at Atlas Performing Arts Center in Washington D.C. Over 40 "underground" DC-based performers played roles in film/footage created by filmmaker Ben Carver for the project. We have talked about live music component, adding more film, stripping things down, etc. John has a very specific way of working. I think for him the process is to dive into the text and keep at it, and test it and play with it from many angles before settling on anything. In fact, it's still in process to some degree. But part of the journey with the piece has been to explore what is intimate about it, how it performs its gestures of fabulousness and how it also has its own defiant voice. John always says that for him part of the journey with it has been to discover what is punk about it/punk in it. For him, that has been key.

DR: What would you say the piece is about – in one word?

CS: Defiance. But if I can add a word: Love.

DR: How did your OBIE Lifetime Achievement award influence your further work – what does it mean to you and has it opened up new opportunities or a space for new dreams and ambitions?

CS: Whether or not the OBIE Award has opened up new opportunities, I couldn't really say. On a practical level. I always feel somehow as if it's an uphill battle. Maybe it always is in a life in art.

On a personal level, I feel as if I have the responsibility, in a good way, to live up to the honor of the award. That is, to keep making work and trusting my vision as an artist. Even when it feels as if you might be writing from the wilderness, so to speak. I mean, I think one of the things the OBIE did for me emotionally was make me realize in a very concrete way that I wanted to follow the passion, come what may. So, if this meant writing what doesn't look like a play play, so be it. It's a risk. Especially when the market has become so narrow, seemingly, for theatre, and where there are more gatekeepers now than even 10 years ago at most venues. There is this incredible fear I think in the industry to cling to some familiar trappings of what a play is/should be. And then some writers buck the trend and get produced well and connect with audiences and critics too and gatekeepers wonder how that happened. Is it exceptionalism? Or should the flood gates be opened? There's this constant back and forth in the industry. Fear is at its center. Namely the fear of failure. It's an interesting time to make art. Because everyone seems to be a little or a lot afraid. More than usual. You either play into it or against it. I've a rebellious, shall we say, defiant streak. So, you can guess where I stand.

"Kill your poor" An extract from JARMAN (all this maddening beauty)

Chaos from within.

Kicking the street.

Steel toes in sockets.

Babies set alight.

Fire along the shoreline.

Ghosts of war -

No retreat, no surrender.

White noise. Angry guitars.

Wild-haired lads and lasses in studs and plaid

Raining a bloody rain on the reign of the Queen's silver jubilee.

Slit tongues

And a bleeding garden.

Cry, beloved dirt

The story of our birth.

Wreck the silver fork

Of dreaded obedience.

Grey battered skies

Against a shop window's gleam.

Fuel the battle cry

Of leaded deliverance.

Kill your poor, oh England

Dig their graves.

Blasted night of Furies

For the hell you'll pay.

Kill your poor, oh England

Sell their skins.

*Wretched night of Furies
For the sins you'll sin.*

*Crown your lovely martyrs
With flaming thorns.
Seek perdition's glory
In Jubilee's scorn.*

*Adorn your greed
In misery's need.
Kill your poor, oh England
Damn their seed.*

Jarman (all this maddening beauty)
(<http://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/ahri/eventrecords/2014-2015/Festival/jarman.aspx>) by
Caridad Svich, directed and performed by John Moletress, film by Ben Carver, produced by
force/collision – plays 23 October at King's College London as part of the Arts and
Humanities Festival, and 4-5 November at Unity Theatre in Liverpool as part of 2014
Homotopia festival.

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- Village Halls, Village Voices (<http://exeuntmagazine.com/features/village-halls-village-voices/>). Pentabus take Rory Mullarkey's World War One play, *Each Slow Dusk*, on a rural tour.