Performance Review of BY HANDS
UNKNOWN

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of the forest, the farcical elements of the production were made strange and the distinction between human and animal disappeared; instead, the audience received a vision of unsettling harmony too progressive for the mob.

Paasilinna’s novel exists mainly in the interior thoughts of the characters and the exterior landscapes of a remote land and thus presents many theatrical challenges. If the production struggled to communicate the interior workings of the novel, it was very successful in visualizing its exterior world. As with all Quantum productions, the set and setting were just as important as the text. Set designer Tony Ferrieri created a hillside amphitheatre, with the remains of the environmental center as a rustic façade for the village, and the expansive forest behind the center as a vision of Scandinavia and playground for the actors. This bizarre natural environment in the middle of a postindustrial city created an atmosphere of strange possibility, where actors appeared onstage in animal busts and Jesus came to life to encourage Huttunen to burn down a church built from greed. The possibilities and unity of opposites in this world in transition reflected the similar changes Pittsburgh continues to experience as the city remakes itself as global yet local, urban yet tranquil, traditional yet experimental.

As the sun went down, the forest disappeared into darkness, and the chirping crickets became a competing chorus, the audience could both feel the impending doom of the exiled hero and forget that they were spectators at a play. The setting was also indicative of the kind of aesthetic spaces that attract artists to Pittsburgh. The burned-out environmental center echoed the troubled past of a neglected rust-belt city, while the lush, deep woods suggested surprising beauty. The innovative use of nature and technology to re-imagine this outdoor space for experimental performance showed the perfect integration of a theatre company with its city—both on the move.

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In 1914, African American author Angelina Weld Grimké drafted a three-act play about lynching, now known as Rachel, which was first staged in Washington, D.C., in March 1916. During the next two decades, lynching plays proliferated as dramatists turned to the one-act format, often forsaking traditional theatrical success. Kym Gomes’s By Hands Unknown returned to such scripts. Gomes decided to address racial violence after seeing the 2000 New York Historical Society presentation of Without Sanctuary, an exhibit featuring nearly a hundred photographs of lynching victims. These images originally circulated in turn-of-the-century newspapers and picture postcards; meanwhile, American dramatists wrote one-acts about those who survived the mobs’ attacks. Lynchings often drew large crowds, but plays highlighting long-term consequences did not. Most often, lynching plays appeared in magazines, available for amateur performance and dramatic readings. When Gomes’s show, consisting of seven one-acts from the 1920s and ’30s, joined the 2010 New York Fringe Festival, a wider audience encountered these scripts and the genre’s message. In particular, Gomes’s revival demonstrated that the physical brutality captured in the photographs was only the beginning of the damage to US families.

Given the source material, the show could have seemed dated and disjointed, but the choices made by Gomes and her co-director Harvey Huddleston as well as the expert execution of the ensemble cast highlighted the dramatic power of the original works and the relevance of lynching plays for today’s audiences. The show’s careful transitions, emphasis on thematic connections, and manipulation of sound and silence articulated this history’s connection to the present.

With seven one-acts, transitional elements proved crucial, and the choices were flawless. Throughout the two-hour presentation, performer Safiya Fred-
ericks provided continuity; she remained stage right, with a musician by her side. Before each individual play, Frederick recited a different poem while a single light shone on her and the musician, who played guitar or harmonica or remained silent. Frederick began with the words of “Strange Fruit,” the poem by Lewis Allen that became a famous song with Billie Holiday’s 1939 recording. Although Frederick recited it as a poem, not a song, the recognizable lines assured audience members that we knew something about the show’s subject matter. When the poem ended, the stage went dark, and it remained so when a choir’s singing initiated the action of Georgia Douglas Johnson’s A Sunday Morning in the South (1925). The choir stayed in the shadows, representing a church near the home where the action took place. When 19-year-old Tom was falsely accused of rape, the singing stopped. Police officers dragged him from the house, and his grandmother cried and prayed. The presentation suggested that whenever “strange fruit” hung from trees, families mourned.

Every recited poem created a bridge between the one-acts. Fredericks ushered the audience from the sympathy inspired by a praying grandmother to the militancy of Claude McKay’s poem “If We Must Die” (1919). Insisting upon the necessity of fighting back, this poem prepared the audience for Mary Burrell’s Aftermath (1919), in which a black soldier returns from World War I to discover that his father has been lynched. The action ended with him exiting, pistol in hand. Similarly, McKay’s poem “The Lynching” (1922) describes white women who looked without sorrow at a hanging corpse; this image provided a segue into Corrie Howell’s The Forfeit (1925). In this white-authored play, a white mother knows that her son is guilty, but when the bloodhounds lead the mob to her house, she directs them to a closet, where she has trapped a mentally challenged black man.

By Hands Unknown incorporated numerous pieces that told radically different stories, but Gomes’s skill at emphasizing thematic connections advanced the show’s overall message that lynching hurt American families—whether they were victims or perpetrators. After a white mother “forfeited” a black man’s life, black mothers intent upon protecting their children took center stage. In Johnson’s one-act Safe (1929), Liza (Ravin Patterson) overheard a family friend being lynched. When the trauma induced labor and her child was born a boy, she kept him “safe from the lynchers” by strangling him to death. The infanticide occurred offstage, but throughout the preceding scene, Patterson’s wild eyes and trembling hands had so masterfully conveyed Liza’s unraveling that the ending was believable, though no less chilling.

Moving from motherly to romantic love, Gomes’s selections again created thematic coherence, while acknowledging the color line that lynching enforced. A poem about black romantic love, Langston Hughes’s “Song for a Dark Girl” (1927), prepared the way for a one-act about young love between whites: Walter Spearman’s Country Sunday (1935), which won recognition from the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. In this white-authored play, Emmaline (Alison Parks) protected the boy that she was seeing against her father’s wishes by accusing a black servant of sexual assault. Emmaline later admitted lying, but could not prevent the violence.

Besides emphasizing common themes, By Hands Unknown manipulated sound and silence to encourage contemplation, especially as the show ended. Gomes and Huddleston projected audio-visual footage from the day in 2005 when the US Senate apologized for having never passed anti-lynching legislation. Then, Without Sanctuary photographs appeared onscreen, in complete silence. It was a silence like none I have ever experienced, especially in a sold-out theater. I have seen lynching photographs professionally displayed many times, but never with the reverence that this production achieved.

By focusing on the families affected—both those who lost loved ones and those responsible for such
losses—the chosen scripts contextualized mob violence and resisted the spectacle of physical brutality. However, lest anyone underestimate what inspired the playwrights during the 1920s and ’30s and the senators in 2005, Gomes took the audience back to where the journey began for her: pictures of mutilated bodies. The photographs have survived to represent lynching history; By Hands Unknown has helped ensure that these remarkable dramas do too.

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