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by Grant Johnson

The Whitney Biennial: My Barbarian's *The Mother*

As part of the Whitney Biennial, performance collective My Barbarian adapts Bertold Brecht's *The Mother*, bringing its story of a mother and son torn apart by class struggle as well as its plain-spoken urgency for communism to present-day New York. Founded in Los Angeles in 2000, My Barbarian consists of Malik Gaines, Jade Gordon, and Alexandro Segade, all of whom also have impressive resumes as individuals—including a PhD, a role on *That 70s Show* and teaching positions at Hunter and Bard Colleges. In the spirit of collectivism, I'll leave these credits to hover over all.



In *The Mother*, all three players rotate between a slew of primary and secondary roles, including revolutionaries, police officers, jail guards, a chef, and a factory foreman. A variety of melodramatic papier-mâché masks that recall classical Greek drama aid these transformations, and, when not in use, decorate the walls of the Whitney's lobby gallery. The comical, almost slapstick Marxist theater of *The Mother* recalls the long established style of the Bread and Puppet theater. In My Barbarian's adaptation, the fourteen narrative scenes that depict Brecht's narrative are punctuated by several "interruptions," participatory ruptures of the fourth wall where the audience is acknowledged and directly addressed, often being soliciting to join the production. Among other tasks, the audience sings an elegy; recites as a marching crowd of revolutionaries; and answers questions in a show of hands, exclamations, and facial expressions. A few are even asked (gasp!) to mount the triangular, raked stage. About a third of the way through, My Barbarian holds a salient press conference, asking and then answering a series of rhetorical questions:

Q: *Why are we doing this play?*

A: *To explore the politics of motherhood, to remind that modernism wasn't politically "empty," because a lot of cool people are communists now (Bill de Blasio, Holland Cotter, Jay Z)*

Q: *Isn't Marxist theater really "in" these days?*

A: *No, not really.*

Q: *Why is this happening in a museum?*

A: *That's a curatorial decision that we can't really speak to.*

Even though it at times turned to song, My Barbarian's *The Mother* is plainly disinterested in any theatrical sparkle or seduction that we may associate with the theater and its musicals. Though, like even the worst musical, there are memorable lyrics ("Theory is a weapon they give kids in college"). This commedia dell'communism is so over "it" (read: spectacle, individual agency, Marxist revolution), so much so that the metaphoric gesture at hand becomes neither raised fist nor spirit fingers, but rather a disinterested, complacently limp wrist.

Throughout, a tone of irony hangs over all. Are these actors truly invested in revolution? Or are they, like so many in the art world, simply thumbing like half-hearted hitchhikers at the much invoked intersection of "art and politics," ultimately invested in towing the former road far more than the latter? At several moments, the dry delivery of My Barbarian makes their actions seem largely farcical, acting out the rhetoric of Marxism to underscore how familiar and yet inoperative (and thus flaccid) this language has become, an industry-wide ruse to which the art world continues to vamp.

By siting My Barbarian's *The Mother* in the Whitney's lobby gallery, one is tempted to hope metaphorically that collectivist, revolutionary thinking is foundational to this Biennial. But hope is about where it ends. *The Mother*'s Marxist dialogue cannot help but become thin gruel at the corner of Madison Avenue and 75th Street, where the Whitney is currently located. Already beside itself, this show can only become more effete and watered down within the staggeringly vast ocean of hierarchies that is Manhattan's Upper East Side. Noticing its deliberate choice of a comfortable participatory form over a more shocking or militant one, one can only hope that My Barbarian intended on a facetious farce that purposely squanders the potential of its platform.