Our Carnal Hearts

APR 19, 2017 - STAGES OF RESISTANCE

by Rachel Mars & Roberta Mock

This piece is part of a blog salon, curated by Caridad Svich, called "Stages of Resistance." The series welcomes reflections on themes related to making work for live performance in political and aesthetic resistance to forms and systems that oppress human rights and censor or severely limit freedom of expression.
We are in increasingly hostile, volatile times around the world, and this salon hopes to serve as a space for considered, thoughtful, polemical articulations of practice and theory on the subject of resistance, the multiple meanings of political art, and the ways in which progressive, wholistic cultural change may be instigated through artworks. Stay tuned for more articles and reflections in this series throughout March and April 2017!

Roberta Mock: I saw your show, *Our Carnal Hearts*, on International Woman’s Day, which seemed really significant to me in this particularly horrific political moment. I was taken by what you said during the talk back afterwards about it being a deliberate choice to make a production with a company of women. I always love seeing women technicians, perhaps since I trained as a lighting technician myself and it was my way into directing theater.

For me, the all-woman company now paradoxically feels both remarkably resistant and slightly old-fashioned. I’m thinking of the 1970s: righteous companies with wonderful names like Cunning Stunts and Hormone Imbalance and Monstrous Regiment. On the other hand, there’s been subsequent critique of so-called 2nd wave feminism for supposedly excluding men.

Rachel Mars: When I conceived the show, it never occurred to me to have a male singing voice in it. If I unpacked that, it’s probably something to do with making a dedicated space for the female voice. I’m not exclusionary – I do work with men when I want to work with men. This time I wanted to work with women. I applied for a wodge of funding and I got it. I had this tiny amount of power to do what I wanted with the money, so why not employ women off stage too?
**Roberta:** Would you describe your choice to work only with women on this production as political?

**Rachel:** I think it’s proven to be. When you enter a theater space as an all-female company, you are sometimes approached by a technician or programmer or front of house person, and they often don’t know what to do, who to ask their questions to. They address a question to the group, and the group decides who is best equipped to answer it.

**Roberta:** That confusion rings very true. When I started making company work, with Lusty Juventus Physical Theatre, it was a mixed company but led and driven by women. The first three shows in the mid to late 1990s always had men in them, but our final show in 2002, *M(other)*, had an all-woman cast and crew. We started working deliberately outside of traditional theatrical role descriptions, so we wouldn’t say “This person is the writer, this person is the director, this person is the choreographer...” When we showed up at a theater, they asked which of us is the director. I would say, “We all are”, and they’d say “Well, we’re going to talk to you because you’re the one who told us that there wasn’t a director.”

**Rachel:** It’s a way of troubling systems and structures that people assume, or have internalized. One of the other performers in *Our Carnal Hearts*, who is in a lot of bands where she’s the only woman, has told me she’s rarely asked questions about technical set ups, or sometimes barely addressed at all at venues. Our production manager just told me a similar story. So I suppose it has become a small political act, retrospectively. It’s hard to know how conscious that was.

“I’m just trying to navigate what feels fair, which of course is subjective. I’m trying to get to somewhere where people feel represented and happy... I’m trying to build up a tool kit by constantly reporting experience.”

**ABOUT THE AUTHORS**

**Rachel Mars** is a performance maker with a background in theater, live art, and comedy. She works as a solo artist and collaborates with a range of artists including nat tarrab as Mars.tarrab. Recent commissions have included Royal Court Tottenham, Fuel Theatre, Home Live Art, and Ovalhouse. [www.rachelmars.org](http://www.rachelmars.org)
**Roberta:** Do you have any thoughts about what the term resistance might mean in relation to your theater work?

**Rachel:** I think we’re resisting an assumption of the power structures that we accept as neutral. I try to travel through life ignoring gender, until somebody reminds me of it. Perhaps this is a privilege. Somehow this all-female company, and all-female rehearsal space, meant we weren’t doing the work “as women” because we weren’t being reminded by anyone else.

**Roberta:** And you weren’t reminding yourselves all the time either, unlike for us creating a show about motherhood from our lived experience. Even though it was about trying to separate the maternal from an essentialist understanding of what it means to be a woman, gender was always in the rehearsal space.

But your subject matter in this piece is not specifically about women or being a woman. I think **Maddy Costa** sums it up well when she suggests the show is asking how envy might “be held within the panoply of human emotion, in a manner that isn’t injurious, as the basis of collaboration rather than competition.”

Many of the all-women or women-centered companies of the 1970s and 80s were collectives, which is a lineage we were definitely drawing on as Lusty Juventus. When you made **Our Carnal Hearts**, did you do this, for example, in a non-hierarchical way?

**Rachel:** No, it wouldn’t be right to say it was non-hierarchical because I was leading the process; I conceived it. I’m the one who wrote the first big funding bid and then employed the others. But it was a collaborative process in the
rehearsal room. The collectivism now is more about being aware of people’s
time and money. As we do the show more and more, the singers are better
equipped to just show up and do it. So we have discussions about the call time
since they’re going to be paid a certain amount no matter what. I’m
aware they’re all freelancers so being there from 3:00pm, as opposed to 5:30,
makes a big difference to them.

Roberta: Of course. How much does that add up to, all of those two hour
periods?

Rachel: Exactly. I will talk most of the financial decisions through with the
company; they are transparent. There are new questions arising as we are
touring more. We talk about how it feels being a part of a company with new
people coming in who are replacements. There’s emotional stuff. We don’t
pretend that we’re not people.

Roberta: I think this is all important. The discussion of the labor of making
theater is a resistant act in itself. It acknowledges time is money and your body
is money, even when you love what you’re doing. And the issues that arise with
replacing people in a cast is the same for a lot of devised work. But I don’t think
it’s a coincidence that a lot of devised work has come through woman-centred
or feminist companies. You start to have to confront the ethics of different
bodies doing the work created from somebody else’s experiences and to ask
who owns those experiences.

books include *Jewish Women on Stage, Film and Television* and she engages in and celebrates practice-research in performance.

Roberta Mock (photo by Lloyd Russell)

More From "Stages of Resistance" >
Rachel: There’s also something resistant about insisting on the show having a long-ish shelf-life. So many shows happen and then they’re done. But this show has cost so much money and took so long to develop, a year and a half to two years, that I wasn’t prepared for it to be in that kind of economy of ‘now what?’ It hasn’t found all its audiences yet so we have to keep doing it. A friend of mine – Paula Varjack – says, “You’ve made this baby and venues ask what are you doing next and it’s like ‘wait a minute, you haven’t even held this baby yet.’” The things we’re encountering about ownership are mainly to do with doing something that is more long term. I’m trying to draw from established systems for advice and deciding what’s right for this work.

Roberta: You say established systems, but there aren’t that many established systems for devised theater – you’re out there in uncharted territory in many ways.

Rachel: I’m just trying to navigate what feels fair, which of course is subjective. I’m trying to get to somewhere where people feel represented and happy. Touring this production – the pre-shows, the conversations over tea – has definitely become a space for talking about our patriarchal fury. And we all appreciate that supported space, where we can decide how we’re going to respond to the world. It becomes, at times, a group of really angry women who are using the support of each other and the differences we come with, to decide how to behave when we feel fucked off, how to carve out space, how to be heard, when it’s time to shut up and get out of the way. I’m trying to build up a tool kit by constantly reporting experience. I’ve been more furious since the US elections in November than ever. I mean day to day.
Roberta: There have been massive changes since you finished making the piece a year ago. Have you noticed any differences with audiences since the Brexit referendum and the US election last year?

Rachel: I think since then there’s been a slightly better expressed need for assembly. I think there’s more capacity and desire for coming together and talking.

Roberta: Do you usually do talk backs after the performances?

Rachel: We try to. We just did one with two economics professors from the University of Essex. That was very much an economic discussion around the theme of competition in the show: good and bad types of competition, envy that comes from inequality. Even without talk backs, I’m finding people want to talk more.

Roberta: To resist competition is to resist what makes a neoliberal society tick – and you’re doing that both by working in a company in a particular way and by exploring it nakedly as subject matter in performance.

Rachel: We’re trying desperately to hold on to being colleagues when everything is telling us we’re in competition with one another. It’s a hard thing to do, I think. Having a space to talk about our grubbier feelings of comparison, putting them on the outside and being aware of what this is doing to us, feels important to me right now.