In a Double Bill, the Avant-Garde Meets a Very Good Girl

Excellent performances, including one by a well-behaved dog, warm up two experimental plays upstate.

Jim Fletcher and Delia, a “black Labbish sort of beast,” in “The Art of Theater” at PS21 in Chatham, N.Y. Credit: Steven Taylor

By Jesse Green
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CHATHAM, N.Y. — There is nothing less avant-garde than a dog. Put one onstage and the artiest notions immediately dissolve into Instagram moments.

Or at least that was my experience with a play called “The Art of Theater,” running through Sunday on a double bill with one called “With My Own Hands” at PS21 in this Hudson Valley town. “The Art of Theater” stars Jim Fletcher — a stalwart of the New York avant-garde scene — and Delia, a local newcomer best known (according to her owners) as “a smart if goofy black Labbish sort of beast.”

You don’t have to be W.C. Fields to know who wipes the floor with whom. Even without canine competition, the avant-garde has been having a hard time of late. By “of late” I mean both the last several decades and the last two years. The political, aesthetic and social disruptions that have often bred theatrical experimentalism can just as easily suppress it; take a look at the plight of the Belarus Free Theater, banned by the Lukashenko government in its home country, forced into exile and now seeking a new base in Europe.

But the Covid pandemic has done even more than dictators to push avant-garde theater off the map. In New York, the three big January showcases of experimental work were once again radically curtailed: the Exponential Festival retreating to online production; Prototype and the Public Theater’s Under the Radar festival folding entirely. Well, almost entirely. “The Art of Theater” and “With My Own Hands,” both by the French playwright, director and choreographer Pascal Rambert, survived the Under the Radar cancellation at this supercool avant-garde hothouse in Columbia County.

And supercool it was on Saturday afternoon — just 4 degrees outside — when, despite free hot toddies and cocoa, an audience of about 25 sat not just masked but variously scarved, coated and hatted as the program began in PS21’s black box theater.

“With My Own Hands,” which came first, is not exactly a warming experience. This 1993 specimen of the classic avant-garde — if that isn’t a paradox — consists of an intense, disturbing and mostly impenetrable 45-minute monologue delivered at breakneck speed by a character bent on suicide. At least that’s what I think was going on; the script, mimicking the disorderly and pressurized output of a mind in fatal distress, speeds right past pauses and punctuation as it twists multiple points of view into a furious screed: “M. says to me you’re getting on everyone’s nerves you smother anyone’s slightest desire to listen stop bawling someday I won’t stand for it anymore and I’ll lock you up pants down in a dark room facing yourself facing myself I write to Hans facing myself here I am facing myself while the bombs come down around me I sunbathe here.”
As a technical matter, speech like that cannot be easy to perform, but Ismaîl ibn Conner, under the playwright’s direction, shapes each clause, no matter how bewilderingly it butts up against others, into razor-edged shards of anguish. Grandiosity, paranoia and pathos flicker like pages in a flipbook, sometimes (in Nicholas Elliott’s suitably grim translation) coalescing into memorably awful images. “Tear all the memory wires out of your head,” the character begs himself, or perhaps the audience.
But if the actor’s grasp on the character is astonishing, the character’s grasp on the audience — as is too often the case with the avant-garde — is weak. To make up for it, the playwright eventually brings out the gun you’ve been expecting all along.

In a way, a gun onstage is not unlike a dog: It rips the fabric of theatrical artifice, replacing it with its own kind of drama. A gun’s drama, though, is usually dull, with only two possible outcomes: It gets used or it doesn’t. But as “With My Own Hands” transitioned (cleverly) into “The Art of Theater” — a 30-minute monologue from 2007, in which an actor played by Fletcher muses aloud to his dog about acting — it was the dog’s drama that took on living dimension.

Not just because the script invests her with human intelligence. (“Theater is low,” the actor instructs. “Speak low. And if you bark — bark low.”) Rather, Delia, a 4-year-old rescue with a sweetheart face and very good manners, can’t help insisting on the canine kind of intelligence. Though she generally sits and listens as required, there is no suppressing her brilliant improvisational skills. Do I smell peanut butter? Let’s get some! Was that a noise in the audience? Let’s investigate! She is less the straight man in the actor’s tale than he is in hers.

Fletcher, best known to New York playgoers as Jay Gatsby in the Elevator Repair Service production of “Gatz,” speaks beautifully and never barks. Still, I didn’t find the actual text of “The Art of Theater” — again translated by Elliott and directed by Rambert — very fascinating. The actor’s thoughts about his art, and the theater types he usually works with, are unsurprising except when occasionally off-putting.

“I never liked old women,” he says. “Old women are so boring.”

But the contrast Rambert draws between this self-involved sourpuss and a good girl like Delia is a brilliant way of making you think about performance. Not just what it costs the performer — though it’s poignantly true, as he says, that “as an actor you have understood that you are a dog and that you will be abandoned.” In that sense, all people are at the mercy of masters; even the character in “With My Own Hands” is “a man trapped in a dog’s body.”

A dog is not trapped in a dog’s body, though. She is her body. She doesn’t have actorly affectations or a good side to turn to the light. She is simply happy to make her people happy; in a way, that’s her job, and Delia is very good at it. When, late in the play, Fletcher picks her up in his arms for a slow dance, she licks his face as they sway.

On a very cold day in a rather cold genre, that was finally warmth enough.