pzazz



And everything is porous as a bodily crack

ALICE GIULIANI & CAMILLA STRANDHAGEN

The art of antibodies



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In ‘And everything is porous as a bodily crack’, Alice Giuliani and Camilla Strandhagen explore a multi-sensorial, poetic and visceral embodiment of (their) chronic illnesses. Bodies become landscapes of duality, laying bare the concrete disabled body and the intangible counterpart, the ‘antibody’— a furious and devilish creature that only exists in their fantasy world. In this ’*Spoonieland’, chronic illness is not merely endured, it is reframed, and defiantly reclaimed. As the invisible becomes visible, the performers bring us on a playful and ironic voyage between limited materiality and unlimited imagination.*

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’But why bother with diagnoses at all, if a diagnosis is but a restatement of the problem’ – ‘Bluets’, Maggie Nelson (quoted in the performance).

A ’spoonie’—a term coined by disability advocate Christine Miserandino—is someone who navigates through life with a chronic illness and as a consequence with but a limited number of ’spoons’ of energy available for everyday tasks. Spoonies occur within a wide range of physical and mental disabilities, including marginalized sub-groups who are unable to function according to the white-ableist-normative rules of the contemporary world. It is an ingenious metaphor that Miserandino uses to explain the intricate economics of energy and the strategic planning required for even the most routine tasks which others might take for granted.

In Giuliani and Strandhagen’s ‘Spoonieland’, the diluted time (space and even gravity) stretches slowly and fluidly, according to both their needs, defying the imperatives of efficiency and productivity of our contemporary societies, in what theorists call ’*crip time’. ‘Spoonieland’* is crafted of porous, cracking materials that fracture and leak like their own boundaries. It is not a world of limitless possibilities but one that reminds constantly of the fragile and limited scope of our existence. Beneath a shroud of biting self-irony, the performers shape a critique of the oppressive structures of systemic inaccessibility and incomprehension. Sliding, crawling and worming their way across a stage covered with a white mat, they draw inspiration from another influential thinker and artist, Johanna Hedva. Her book ’The Theory of Sick Women’ tackles the hierarchy of visibility and exclusion within the framework of Hanna Arendt’s definition of ’being political’ as an active member in the public sphere during protests. As ’spoonies’ know all too well, activity is a precious resource. Here, the two performers appear as well in the name of all those incapable of coming to the actual theatre space, as going to the theatre as a praxis is rooted in the same ableist system. Many a spoonie will be unable to attend this performance indeed.

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As the audience enters the theatre, they are greeted by Antonella Fittipaldi, sitting on the side of the stage. In a calm, soothing, moderate tone, she indicates the visitors how to choose freely where to sit or even lie down: on the upper ranks or close to the performers or even laying on the floor. This voice, coming from the left side of the stage, beckons softly and steadily, her presence anchoring the space for the next fifty minutes. We can go 'lower and lower', as she almost murmurs while changing into the narrator of unfolding story. The stage itself mirrors this descent: its floor, whose surface seems to be the lowest one can sink, later shows hidden depths as the white mattresses open and even swallow the performers in one specific scene. The stage is further filled with several pale objects comparable to detached body tissue and deformed organs. Oversized leaves cascade from the ceiling reminiscing rippling, sedimentary structures of epidermis. Among these strangely familiar forms, a bleeding vulva (or is it a skin-volcano?) stands as a poignant and Freudian focal point.

The story starts with a collapse—a moment where captivating creatures appear as both fragile and furious, harboring a secret they need to share with the audience. From the very first instant, Alice and Camilla's bodies lie motionless on the floor, grounded against its seemingly smooth surface. They will never fully rise, defying the normative verticality of able-bodied existence. Instead, they move and exist horizontally, battling with gravity by standing on their heads, legs stretched into the air, or contorting their forms while lying on their backs. Soon enough we see that one of Giuliani's legs is thinner than the other. The contrast of the two legs, working together, part of the same body, but being all the same so very different remains an important grounding point in the piece. Her 'legs will constantly burn' throughout the piece. They will creep under the white mattress, thus becoming invisible in the darkness as so many chronic illnesses do. Her legs will never stop burning.

Together, the two performers crawl, gnaw, move on all fours, repeating 'spoon by spoon' mantra-like, and express themselves with vivid, almost feral energy. Their movement expression is influenced by mime and clowning, evident in exaggerated gestures, caricature-like makeup, and high-pitched, childlike voices. Yet even if the theme is enriched by the at times evocative and poetic narrative, the long monologues of spoken word take away a lot of the attention from the bodies, movement and space itself. At one point, the performers refer to a 'Blue book'. It is 'Bluets' by Maggie Nelson, a book that explores this feeling of being deeply, deeply blue, overwhelmed by sorrow, sadness, injury and grief. In the performance, the blue is concrete, in the deep structures of the embryonic surfaces and in the blue light that occasionally consumes the yellow, green and reddish orange on stage.

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The normative authority appears several times throughout the performance. It takes on the humoristic form of coloured lights (mainly red and green), and a deep masculine voice that thunders while explaining that 'feminine creatures are too emotional, and the symptoms aren't real'. It is both devastating and all too recognizable. The legacy of the hysterical female figure endures, as female illness is still all too easily cast aside as an invention of an irrational imagination. In a memorable scene, Stenhagen hovers above Giuliani with a huge injection needle. To the heroic tunes of Johannes Strauss's 'Radetzky March', she prepares to insert the needle in the buttock of Giuliani. As the music gallops towards

glorious combat, so Stenhagen and Giuliani shape their own moment of glory as the antibody boldly charges forth through the needle, challenging the disease to mortal combat.

In a later scene teeming with wild, rebellious antibodies, one of the performer twists into bridge pose, her body arching like a spectral spider beneath a pulsating green light that hums through the space while shouting: 'rebuilding, uniqueness, crippness'. Yet, for all the bursts of inspiration a refreshing sense of moderation prevails. The piece never ends up as a paroxysm of energy. Instead, like the illness within, it is like steadily smoldering fire. The two creatures eventually fold into one another, into each other's embrace and care. Before a new ephiphany, Camilla hums a lullaby song, carrying the words like a fragile echo across the expanse— 'forty thousand galaxies away...'.

As the song dissipates, a total darkness lingers long enough for the audience to realise that the performance has ended. I am left wanting more. The slow-paced 50 minutes slipped by with surprising speed, opening many layers of thought on the visible and invisible facets of disability, accessibility, and the concept of '*crip time*'. However, the themes and the scenes of the piece are ripe for even deeper explorations. I am curious to see what the artists will come up with next.