



The Charlotte Salomon Project

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Komail Aijazuddin · Nov 3, 2006

"Have you been to the gallery?" Charlotte Salomon asks.

Salomon, a German Jew, was killed at Auschwitz in 1944. Standing before me, in a charming space in Brooklyn, is her personification. The daring company Polybe + Seats is the one responsible for her resurrection in the play *The Charlotte Salomon Project*, based on her life and art (she had made over 1,300 paintings before she died). It's strange, to say the least, when the protagonist is asking you a question. Get used to it.

As you enter the Brooklyn Fire Proof, even in line to buy tickets, the characters are shouting, stomping, moaning, singing, breaking down, firing up, and cleaning all over the place. The audience shuffles around rooms plastered with prints of Salomon's paintings as they see moving tableaux of the work punctuated by ambient but intriguing conversations ("My head is ablaze with the passions of terribly deep concerns!" "I hope that in the soul penetrating nature of the work, this will be forgiven..."). It justifies the play's tagline: "life? or theater?"

Walking around the rooms, one feels like a voyeur in Salomon's home, overhearing private conversations in secluded corners, witnessing her grandmother going through a nervous fit, seeing Charlotte taking drawing lessons, stepping out of the maid's way. It's a marvelous experience! By the time you enter the theatre, you have already formed silent likes and muted hates. You have heard these characters caught "off-guard," seen them in secrecy, and witnessed something that imbibes you with a false sense of intimacy strong enough to linger with you well into the actual play.

There, we witness Charlotte's complicated relationships with her loving stepmother, her mad father, her batty grandmother, her mother's opera teacher (her mother's lover but Charlotte's love), and various others. The characters routinely discuss the actual process of staging the play, announcing (all the while in character) when the next scene is, who everyone is, or even musings on what we have seen so far. The acting is, on the whole, compelling. Samantha Debicki's Charlotte is delicate, confident, fragile, and persuasive. Andrew Gilchrist, who plays Amadeus (the opera instructor), is impressive. The truly stellar performance, though, is Molly Parker-Myers as Charlotte's stepmother, who is sublime in most any scene. The script is peppered with meaty monologues that showcase the actors, sometimes at the expense of our patience, but each is done powerfully and commands the attention of an audience still quite petrified that some of

them might have to take a more active role in the play (don't worry, you stay safely in your seats for most of it).

Jessica Brater's direction and Miriam Felton-Dansky's dramaturgy are perhaps the real stars of the evening. The acting, the paintings, the curating of the paintings and tableaux, when seen as shining components of a glittering whole, are ultimately what gives this play the status of a theatrical staging that defies definition. The level of planning and thought that is obvious when you are living this piece (there is no better verb) is exceptionally impressive.

It is a bubbling mixture of fine art, theatre, role-playing, and installation, making this less a play than an experience. If you are looking for visceral, raw, experimental theatre done with subtlety, ingenuity, and sophistication, then you can't miss this. I'm sure Charlotte Salomon would say the same. If you don't believe me, go and ask her.

Opened

Nov 1, 2006

Closed

Nov 19, 2006

Conceived & Adapted by

Jessica Brater & Miriam Felton-Dansky

Additional Text

J Burstein-Stern, E Emmons, A Gilchrist, A Glickstein, K Schapiro

Director

Jessica Brater

Producer

Polybe + Seats