

## The Abstract Pact

### Polybe + Seats Mounts Four (Five?) Gertrude Stein Pieces

published: August 12, 2003

- photo: Harry C. Rosenblum



*In a Garden*: a World War II-era short

Gertrude Stein never fails to attract emerging artists to the salon of her pathbreaking imagination. Yet what Stein's devotees need to scrupulously ask themselves is whether their enjoyment stems from the experience of her work or the ideas behind it. For some, these two dimensions are inseparable. But it occurred to me, as I walked through the Guggenheim's current exhibit of Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich, that the true test of abstract art lies not in the persuasiveness of its theoretical rationale but rather in its capacity to keep us looking. Malevich's canvases, with their ingenious spatial arrangements of geometric forms, were more compelling than either the accompanying academic gobbledygook of the curators or even the painter's own sometimes polemical titles. Does Stein's writing similarly repay closer attention, or does the figure of Stein (as pioneering lesbian feminist, visionary modernist, and expatriate cultural critic) motivate our interest beyond (not to put too fine a point on it) her often loony syntactical gimmicks?

Polybe + Seats, a young company that takes its name and inspiration from Stein's theatrical oeuvre, offers us a chance to examine the question vis-à-vis her frequently discussed yet seldom produced dramatic works. *Careful of Eights* is a bill of three Stein short plays written during World War II and originally performed by children, bookended by two versions of *Lucretia Borgia*, a theatrical concoction having something or other to do with the woman who allegedly made hash of her husbands and lovers.

In fairness to Stein, this patchwork production, directed by Jessica Brater, is really more of a series of workshop exercises than a full-budgeted realization of the plays. Mounted on a shoestring (though featuring a lovely three-piece orchestra led by Jason Binnick), *Careful of Eights* doesn't have the resources (technical or experiential) to marshal together a coherent artistic vision. Still, it's possible to appreciate Stein's notion of theater as landscape, which in these works involves shards of melodramatic narrative, glued together in such a way as to force you to relinquish expectations of linear rationality and instead exist in what Stein called a "continuous present." It's also, as my theater companion noted, an opportunity to learn a coded (though not so secretive) language of lesbian desire, which shines sporadically through the words with idiosyncratic wit and tenderness.

The ensemble take a frolicsome tack in their staging, announcing the title of each play (as well as act number) with a genial spirit of collective creativity. Lindsay Torrey, who plays Lucretia Borgia, serves as a kind of impresario, orchestrating her fellow actors to dramatize scenarios that admittedly need a little coaching. The game cast, clearly reveling in the freedom of anti-realism, move in a manner every bit as stylized as the dialogue and stage directions. Sure, half the pleasure comes from watching a promising company bravely taking on the impossible Stein challenge. Yet the production does what art of any order is supposed to do—momentarily arrest the flittingly resistant mind.

**Details:**

*Careful of Eights*

Plays by Gertrude Stein

American Theatre of Actors

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