

Split Britches Reviews

Lost Lounge

January 18, 2011

By Jill Dolan

This elegiac evening with Peggy Shaw, Lois Weaver, and musician Vivian Stoll is a beautiful meditation on change, loss, and aging, delivered as a Sid Caesar/Imogene Coco- or Mike Nichols/ Elaine May- style lounge act with post-modern stylings. In Dixon Place's expansive basement black-box theatre—excavated, as Shaw and Weaver imagine, from three stories of layered dirt—the inimitable lesbian pair and their musical partner trade songs and repartee against a visual and sonic backdrop of the city being demolished and (presumably) reconstructed in unrecognizable ways. The images never picture the new; they only show us the wreckage, through an aperture that expands as the evening progresses. *Lost Lounge* testifies to the past, keeping its view of the present and the future only rueful.

The show is melancholic, the laughs wistful and poignant. Seeing the performance just a day or two after the death of Ellen Stewart, the doyenne of New York's downtown theatre scene, made the performance even more of a testimony to time's passing, an even more nostalgic, slightly doleful examination of life's fleeting.

Before the show begins, as the audience waits upstairs in Dixon Place's own small lounge, Shaw mingles, asking people what they miss about New York (be it a person or a building) and taking notes on small pieces of square white paper. Dressed formally in a black tux and cummerbund, with a lively black and white bow tie topping her on-going illusion of gentlemanliness, Shaw is a woman with a mission—she chats, but she's collecting impressions, ideas, words, names. When the audience descends to the theatre, Shaw accompanies us.

Weaver is pre-set, sitting on a black wooden stool and slumped against the black wire bar that's the evening's only set piece. Weaver wears a wide black-and-white horizontally striped dress adorned with excessive petticoats, a black velvet bodice, and a décolletage deep enough to store some of her (and our) secrets.

Stoll, too, is already present, standing sentinel by her electronic keyboard, an unlit cigarette dangling from her lips, white against her purple-black dinner jacket. Throughout the short evening, she plays, sometimes 1950s standards to which Shaw and Weaver sing in off-key, heartfelt renditions, sometimes instrumentals, wistful melodies that set the evening's scene and its tone.

The "lounge" act provides the evening's conceit and its structure, while "lost" provides its theme. Shaw and Weaver play—although *Lost Lounge* is in some ways a "reality" show—an embattled duo who've worked together long enough to be able to predict one another's moves and motives, whose long-term relationship chafes just enough to give their act a testy edge. In fact, when Weaver turns her back, Shaw flicks folded up bits of paper at her, whether to get her attention or to annoy her.

Weaver and Shaw have explored these themes before in their duets as *Split Britches* (they formed the influential, historic feminist performance troupe with Deb Margolin in the early 80s, and now use the name themselves). Their work together—It's a Small House and *We Live in it Always*, for example—often tracks the emotional complications of a once romantic, life-long working relationship.

But the performance of on-stage intimacy takes on new poignancy in *Lost Lounge*, in part because Shaw and Weaver are now squarely middle-age, and in part because they perform their own longevity and their relationship's changes against the backdrop of a city transforming in ways they mourn.

The video projections of demolition and deconstruction and the clanging, beeping sounds of jackhammers and dump trucks backing up and moving out also evoke the work that's been on-going at Ground Zero for the last 10 years. But it also recalls the rest of downtown Manhattan and its many, if less cataclysmic, losses. When, at the show's end, the performers read the slips of paper Shaw collected from us in the lobby, describing what and who we miss, we hear people refer to restaurants and other neighborhood locales that no longer exist, as well as people (more than one referred to Stewart's death).

Weaver expresses her own astonishment at how quickly these changes are wrought. One day, she remarks, the Bowery mainstay Marion's is there, flourishing, and the next, the neighborhood restaurant is just . . . gone. Spectators hiss at the mention of NYU, whose corporate expansion plans have changed much of the West and East Village into a student dorm.

Lost Lounge mourns these changes, but at the same time, it celebrates what endures. Weaver and Shaw (or their "characters") might harp at one another, but they're there, witnessing one another's solo performance turns and helping one another with grace, respect, and love. One of the evening's loveliest numbers is meant to be funny—and generates a few laughs and no doubt a lot of smiles—but it's also deeply moving: Shaw and Weaver dance, partnering one another through iconic ballroom dancing poses and moves. But they need assistance to carry it off; instead of accomplishing the bends and lifts and twirls with which a younger couple might display their virtuosity, the ubiquitous black stool is used as an assistive dancing device for those whose bones and muscles and tendons can't emulate those movements without it.

Weaver lays across the stool as she falls back into Shaw's arms in a conventional swoon, and rather than lifting Weaver when she leaps, Shaw holds up the stool. Weaver reaches up toward it, representing, rather than executing, the balletic moves of a conventional romantic duet. The partners accomplish the scene with the wink and nod that's the signature of *Lost Lounge*, but its elegiac implications are inescapable. These performers are aging women, whose bodies can't quite realize everything for which their imaginations continue to wish. And yet at the same time, they're observant, mordant, and smart, prodding us to see what's lost and what's gained in the inexorable progress of personal and public history.

Shaw and Weaver have always been very physical performers, actors who devise their own choreography (with help from Stormy Brandenberger) and dialogue, fashioning their numbers from a wish-list of images, ideas, and issues to which their desires lead them. *Lost Lounge* lets them mash up the crooning melodies of lounge singers (one of their best duets is "Autumn Leaves") with the direct address of stand-up comics, combined with the feminist insights of the political project that always grounds their work.

Their career-long interventions in conventional gender performance and the signs of sexuality continue to flourish here, as Shaw's mercurial gentleman courts and cares for Weaver's femme dynamo. Shaw runs through her quintessential poses, arms up in the air, Richard Nixon-style, pointing and punctuating, fiery and present. Weaver is a solid, dependable presence, hands on her hips around her big hoop skirt, casting her ironic gaze in our direction.

Both performers get down and dirty. Shaw lies on the floor close to the top of the show to listen, she says, to the sounds of the earth, and Weaver falls to the ground later on, her petticoats awry, to deliver a ruminative monologue. They aren't ginger with themselves—Weaver and Shaw's whole-hearted physical investment continues to be risky and delightful, a model for how to dispense with fear of foolishness.

These two have always been clowns of a sort, but rather than playing for laughs, they play for insights, creating a community of presumptively like-minded folks. We're something of a coterie crowd, the audience at this performance, an assumption borne out when Shaw, Weaver, and Stoll read what spectators miss about New York, and the performers, invariably, nod in recognition and agreement. Shaw and Weaver see the world through the unique, productive perspective of people who've been around the block and know its history intimately.

A palpable sense of "then and now" infuses *Lost Lounge*. But Shaw and Weaver don't intend to chastise those who know the present better than the past, but rather to suggest a kind of costs-benefits analysis of what happens when time passes, when neighborhoods change, when the small get devoured by the large.

Lost Lounge is finally a generous gesture, an opportunity, Weaver tells us, for us to "rest," since we so rarely get the chance. In fact, the show moves more slowly than much of their other work; several times, a big digital clock is projected on the screen behind the performers, and they stand, silently, while a few minutes tick by in something of a doomsday countdown. Or perhaps it's just a time-out, a real rest, an opportunity to truly lounge, together, inspired and moved by our favorite lesbian feminist downtown performers, who carry our history and help us imagine our collective future.

Review originally appeared on the Feminist Spectator blog.

Lost Lounge Mourns Vanished Gothams, Celebrates Survival

December 15, 2009

By Miriam Felton-Dansky

‘Why should it be loved as a city? It is never the same city for a dozen years altogether,’ wrote Harper’s Monthly in 1856, complaining of New York’s endless flux. Live in the city long enough, and you’ll inevitably lose something irreplaceable—a favorite dive bar, a beloved park. Lost Lounge—a cheerfully elegiac cabaret, starring Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of Split Britches, itself a cherished downtown institution—mourns vanished Gothams, and celebrates survival.

Shaw and Weaver bicker, flirt, and harmonize their way through romantic vignettes, meditations on aging, and playful love songs (Vivian Stoll accompanies on keyboard). Silhouetted against the white walls of Dixon Place’s brand-new theater—Shaw in tuxedo, Weaver in crinoline—they look like lonely, elegant clowns. (Talking about bygone days in freshly renovated digs is an irony not lost on the duo.) Projected time countdowns register the piece’s own swift passage; Weaver consoles spectators on their personal New York losses. In the end, their wry recollections begin to seem like solace for the city’s relentless pace of change.

Review originally appeared in the Village Voice.

MUST: THE INSIDE STORY

August 24, 2009

By Lyn Gardner

There are moments in theatre when space and performance collude so exactly they create something quite extraordinary. So it is with Peggy Shaw's one-woman show, an enticing and evocative mixture of text and music, the latter played by the Clod Ensemble.

Taking place in the curved lecture theatre of the Medical School, it turns us all into students of Shaw's body. Hers is one marked by loss and scarred by experience – and she is making an exhibition of herself just as the Elephant Man was made into an exhibition for the 19th-century medical world.

This is an exquisite lesson in anatomy, a journey underneath the skin, a mapping of the human body in which the sites of love and loss are placed under the microscope and analysed with a forensic gaze. It is as if Shaw is taking a scalpel to herself, opening up old wounds, so that the shadows of a lifetime are rendered visible, the joins where heart and bones were broken for all to see.

It's a beautiful performance, measured, grounded, delicate and yet immensely powerful, of a brave and beguiling piece of writing. This is open-heart surgery of the artistic kind, performed without anaesthetic.

Review originally appeared in the Guardian.

When the American Dream Gets Lost in a Giant Storm

June 19, 2008

By Andy Webster

Lois Weaver is a playful pixie of performance art. When, at the start of “Miss America,” she approaches the front of the audience from the back row, clambering over people and snapping pictures of them, she conveys a delightful sense of mischief. Offering mild recriminations (“You never told me that you don’t really love anyone,” “You never told me that you romanticize poverty”), she is a Park Avenue [Kaye Ballard](#) in a tiara, bob wig, black dress and a matronly knee-length coat. Onstage she joins Peggy Shaw a frequent partner of Ms. Weaver’s since 1981 in the Split Britches troupe—who suggests a [Bill Irwin](#) clown in her jaunty loose-fitting suit with pants too short.

Ms. Weaver’s energy animates “Miss America,” a freewheeling attack on American foreign policy, beauty pageants, evening news programs and machismo posturing, generously seasoned with free verse and gay humor. Characters in Ms. Weaver’s arsenal include a weatherwoman, a fashion photographer and a petulant coquette (“a co-dependent Cassandra”). Ms. Shaw, with her deep voice and wry reticence, covers the more masculine roles. Aiding the two are Jan Bell’s lights and Vivian Stoll’s sound design, both unobtrusively effective.

But Ms. Weaver’s buoyancy cannot sustain this scattershot show. If the production has unifying motifs, they are a colossal storm (evoking [Hurricane Katrina](#))—a seeming metaphor for the country’s current state—and the Miss America competition itself, pilloried as the acme of hollow values. (A Weaver persona speaks of her onetime dream to do a striptease in the talent category; a Shaw character recalls winning the title: “It was a miracle! I was—special!”)

The symbols are obvious, and nontopical bits—Ms. Shaw’s mock tap dance to prerecorded steps, her twists on glamour poses—feel familiar. When Ms. Shaw cries, “I don’t want to do the old act! I want to do something new!,” it sounds honest. “We are having a hard time making a comedy out of America,” she says. Maybe a drama is in order.

Review originally appeared in The New York Times.

Lois Weaver Performs Resistant Femme

January 2007

By Nicole Eschen

In “Diary of a Domestic Terrorist,” performance artist Lois Weaver fused lecture and performance formats to discuss current political issues and the history of her performance work in an engaging and entertaining presentation. On November 30th, Weaver performed this piece at UCLA in an event sponsored by the Center for Performance Studies, the Center for the Study of Women, and the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies Program. She advocated personal and domestic resistance to authority visualized through the metaphor of hanging laundry in public. Laundry, underwear, and nudity became recurrent themes tying together the threatening possibilities for women’s bodies onstage from Janet Jackson’s nipple to strippers in feminist context to Weaver’s work with incarcerated women.

Weaver has been performing since she began working with the feminist Spiderwoman Theater in the 1970s. She is most known for her work with Peggy Shaw and Deb Margolin as Split Britches, who have performed lesbian and feminist theater since 1980. She was instrumental in the founding of the WOW Café in New York, one of the longest-running women’s theater collectives in the United States. She currently lives in London, where she works with the Gay Sweatshop Theatre Company and teaches contemporary performance practices at Queen Mary, University of London. “Diary of a Domestic Terrorist” served as a retrospective of some of Weaver’s past work, including a scene of feminist nudity in the performance of Split Britches’ *Lust and Comfort*, a video of her work with incarcerated women in London and Brazil, and an excerpt from a performance of her piece “Dress Suits to Hire” by women from the Woman Theatre in Taiwan. She also presented scenes from the show she is currently performing, “What Tammy Needs to Know,” featuring the character of a country-western singer and aspiring lesbian, Tammy Whynot.

“if some of our simplest actions like hanging laundry, standing up for what I believe in, taking off my clothes... are going to place me under suspicion, then, Yes, Mr. President, I am a domestic terrorist.”

In the course of her performance of “Diary of a Domestic Terrorist,” Weaver admits that “I am now and have for some time been a feminist” and asks the audience to stand if they identify as feminist or supports the work of feminists, bringing the whole audience to its feet in a show of solidarity and resistance. This show of feminism is juxtaposed with another identity that Weaver performs... that of a terrorist. Weaver states that “if some of our simplest actions like hanging laundry, standing up for what I believe in, taking off my clothes... are going to place me under suspicion, then, Yes, Mr. President, I am a domestic terrorist.” Throughout the piece, Weaver troubles the notion of terrorism, using it to criticize governments obsessed with security at the expense of public resistance. When activities such as “hanging out laundry, packing bags, taking photographs, writing letters, disagreeing with dinner guests...going to the library [or] baring breasts” become suspicious in a culture that asks citizens to report suspicious activities, Weaver poses performing these private and domestic activities, and performing them publicly and suspiciously, as a means of protest and resistance.

“Diary of a Domestic Terrorist” brought together ideas from throughout Weaver’s body of work to address the current political climate in a provocative way. From the video of Weaver hanging laundry in the middle of the city and at the beach that began the performance, Weaver encouraged the audience to reconceive domestic acts as public and political. Passing out clothespins with “Domestic Terrorist” written on them, Weaver invited the audience to hang their laundry, or use the

clothespins as accessories, or for whatever other purpose they could imagine, but in doing so she turned a simple object and a simple domestic act into a political statement of resistance.

Review originally appeared in the Center for the Study of Women Journal at UCLA.

Here Hand Has a Mind of Its Own

May 26, 2005

By Jason Zinoman

"Dress Suits to Hire," a lesbian love story told in the overheated style of film noir, begins with a wink at the audience. A femme fatale struggling with her sexuality, Deeluxe (Peggy Shaw), is strangled by her own right hand. Michigan (Lois Weaver) walks toward the body and looks at the hand disapprovingly. "I suppose you know what this will mean," she says. "She will be unable to do the show."

The rest of the often clunky play, which Split Britches, a troupe founded by Ms. Shaw, Ms. Weaver and Deborah Margolin, revived to commemorate its 25th anniversary, takes place in something of an erotic dream that veers uncomfortably from postmodern cleverness to earnestly felt romance.

"Dress Suits" first opened in 1987, long before the sight of two women kissing had become a marketing gimmick and "lesbian noir" had received a Hollywood treatment with the cult hit "Bound." Ms. Weaver and Ms. Shaw, who play their roles with deadpan conviction, are once again the heroines, working in a rental suit store, passing the time trying on clothes and spitting out cool one-liners. "Being a girl is just a phase I'm going through," Michigan says.

Like its main characters, the play, written by Holly Hughes in collaboration with Ms. Shaw and Ms. Weaver and directed by Ms. Weaver, seems to have many different identities. One moment, it's a heavy-handed riff on homophobia and gender politics. Another, it is as light and silly as a Mel Brooks comedy. Both modes merge, though, in the scenes between Deeluxe and her bullying right hand, which is named, none to subtly, Little Peter. Imagine an abusive sock puppet without the sock.

Still, Ms. Shaw and Ms. Weaver manage a few affecting moments, including a tender and lovely dance, choreographed by Stormy Brandenberger. And there are also pleasures for fans of pulp fiction, since the script contains enough punchy, hard-boiled quotations to fill a Bartlett's collection of downtown theater. One of my favorites is spoken by Ms. Shaw: "She's got a bad heart. The kind you die from. Runs in the family. I got a bad heart too. Just not the kind you die from. The kind that makes you wear too much eye makeup."

Review originally appeared in The New York Times.

Butch/Femme Reign Again

May 19, 2005

By Grant Tyler Peterson

The packed audience at La MaMa bubbled with excitement on opening night for Split Britches' *Dress Suits to Hire*. New York's most renowned lesbians from Carmelita Tropicana to Rosie O'Donnell mixed with theater scholars and downtown aficionados to celebrate the return of downtown's favorite lesbian team, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver.

Those unfamiliar with Shaw, Weaver, and the work of Split Britches have a rare opportunity to see what cultural scholars have been writing about since the 80's. Shaw and Weaver are two of the foremothers of American women's theater and were crucial in the founding of WOW Cafe. Split Britches rejects theatrical realism, seeing it as a structural prison for female players, especially for lesbians. Instead they employ discursive some might say queer performance tactics, freeing female representations in innovative ways. These include direct address, non-temporal sequencing, cartoonish sets, drag, camp, and, most notably, a postmodern performance of "self."

The show that best highlights the group's philosophy of fractured identity is perhaps *Belle Reprive* (1991), a campy deconstruction of *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Stanley Kowalski, played by Shaw, exclaims, "I'm just thousands of parts of other people all mashed into one body. I am not an original person. I take all these pieces, snatch them off the floor before they get swept under the bed, and I manufacture myself." This self-manufacturing sensibility, especially regarding notions of "butch" and "femme," is the central theme of Split Britches's work.

Dress Suits to Hire, collaboratively written with another downtown legend, Holly Hughes, was originally staged in 1987. Its 2005 restaging marks Split Britches' 25th anniversary and Shaw and Weaver's 10-year reunion in this country. (Weaver was performing and teaching in the U.K., and Shaw was doing cultural work with prisons in Brazil and performing in the United States.)

Shaw and Weaver's on- and offstage relationship has long exemplified the butch-femme lesbian aesthetic. On opening night, when the lights slowly came up on the two sitting side by side, the audience welcomed them with applause. The two are no longer a couple in real life. But this, combined with the extra pounds and a few wrinkles, makes the show about two women who cannot escape each other's gravity all the more resonant.

Shaw and Weaver play "sisters" who live in an existential rental-clothing shop on Second Avenue. With two racks of mostly male clothing and the occasional gown that drops from the sky, the two seduce and repel each other. They role-play various modes of gender and sexuality, domination and submission. *Dress Suits* succeeds as a poetical and satirical send-up of heterosexual romance literature, as well as a tantalizing meditation on lesbian desires.

Rich with double entendres and triple meanings, campy songs, and costumes, *Dress Suits* cleverly flirts with the audience through winks and stripteases of both the literal and figurative variety. And like the pearl necklace that snaps under Shaw and Weaver's embrace, showering the floor with pearls, traditional ideas of gender and sexuality are ruptured in this show, with new meanings wonderfully scattered about.

Dress Suits's revival is a treat for longtime fans of Split Britches and a not to be missed debut for those new to their work. The years away have only been good to this long-missed couple. Shaw

and Weaver are as impressive as ever, expertly challenging the constraints of cultural norms and tickling the audience's funny bone while they're at it.

Review originally appeared on offonline.com.

An Easy Segue From Tender to Tough

October 13, 2003

By Margo Jefferson

A tall performer with big shoulders saunters on in soul man-rockabilly garb with a bohemian twist: deep red iridescent tux jacket, pale green shirt, blue jeans, two-tone shoes in brown and beige. A light-blue Chevy with a touch of turquoise and patches of rust sits on one side of the stage. The car's bed sits on the other side, and a musician -- same jacket, black pants -- sets up a drum kit inside it.

We hear phrases of R&B, soul and British pop; "Rocket 88," "Mustang Sally," "A Sign of the Times." The performer strides back and forth, firing out questions and assertions about the violent deaths of Sam Cooke, Otis Redding and Marvin Gaye; about being young and gullible ("young and dumb" in the words of the soul survivor, Ike Turner); about aging -- maturing -- as a process of "getting dirty." Part of that dirt comes from learning the facts of your own life. The performer used to think she was Scottish. Then her father died, and every relative who showed up for the funeral was Irish.

At first, if you don't know that Peggy Shaw has been a force in experimental theater since the 1970's, you might think she is a he. By the end of her new show, "To My Chagrin," which opened Thursday at P.S. 122 (First Avenue and Ninth Street) and plays through Oct. 26, Ms. Shaw has turned the question Henry Higgins posed in "My Fair Lady" on its self-satisfied head. "Why can't a woman be more like a man?" the professor asked. Watching Ms. Shaw makes us ask: "Why can't white soul men be more like this woman?"

I once saw her do quite a Stanley Kowalski in a freewheeling riff on Tennessee Williams called "Belle Reprieve." "To My Chagrin" is directed by her longtime collaborator, Lois Weaver. In 1980 they joined the performance artist Deb Margolin to form the rambunctious Split Britches Company. Their cheeky theater pieces included "Upwardly Mobile Home," "Lesbians Who Kill" and (my favorite title) "Little Women, the Tragedy."

"To My Chagrin" is filled with tonal changes. It moves through aggression, nostalgia and tender idealism, and between rowdy humor and social criticism. I'd call it a prose poem. There are mysterious, striking images (Ms. Shaw's white body buried neck-deep in black dirt). There are daredevil stories. She breaks loose from a town where girls were suspect if they drove fast, and she hits the road, buying cars (an Impala, a Coupe de Ville) and acquiring girlfriends.

There's a constant give and take -- a call and response -- between her stories and Vivian Stoll's drums and sound design. She memorializes past loves by talking and crooning her way through two verses of Sinatra's "It Was a Very Good Year." She hurls herself into "The Buzz-Cut Flat-Top Blues" an original in the grandstand and boast mode. She does Jerry Lee Lewis piano tricks on the hood of the car, and punctuates her story with the opening syllables of Otis Redding's "Fa-fa-fa-fa (Sad Song)."

Ms. Shaw has the virile physicality of those early performers. She has her own choreographer, too -- she and Stormy Brandenberger do each other proud. She hurls herself against the Chevy as if it were a guitar she was out to decimate. She sits inside it in the classic cool-guy way: window down, head out, tough expression, arm resting on the chassis with easy possessiveness. That's the attitude she brings to a brief disquisition on masculinity too. Yes, she looks masculine, she says, coming out from under the car. What exactly does that mean? Among other things, an urge

to compare body parts: "I got my Adam's apple from my dad -- bigger than James Dean's," she declares.

But where did she get the mixed-race grandson whom she will teach to drive one day? Her mixed marriage (homosexual woman, heterosexual man) produced a daughter, which led to a second-generation mixed marriage, this one between an "inbred white bread" woman and an African-American man.

What does she hope and fear for this grandson? What does she want him to be -- or not to be -- given the state of the world? The "nots" are easier to list: they include "not a politician" and "not on death row." But Ms. Shaw never swerves into righteous generalization. She gives us particulars. First we live through her metamorphoses. Then we witness -- and enter -- this startling new union.

What could be more startling than hearing her sing James Brown's funk anthem "I Got You (I Feel Good)" as a lullaby? Startling and beautiful, for after all, what child wouldn't long to be told:

I feel good, I knew that I would, now
I feel good, I knew that I would
So good, so good, 'cause I got you.

TO MY CHAGRIN: Written and performed by Peggy Shaw, in collaboration with the musician and sound designer Vivian Stoll; edited and directed by Lois Weaver; choreographed by Stormy Brandenberger; costumes by Susan Young; stage management, Larkin Callaghan. Presented by Dixon Place and P.S. 122. At 150 First Avenue, at East Ninth Street, East Village.

Review originally appeared in The New York Times.

Different Seasons: Peggy Shaw hit middle age and became a Menopausal Gentleman

May 9, 2002

By Patrick Williams

It's cliché: Women at midlife suffer hot flashes; men at midlife buy hot cars. So what happens to a 53-year-old butch lesbian grandmother entering menopause? In playwright [Peggy Shaw](#)'s case, she puts on a double-breasted suit and suspenders, passes for a 35-year-old man and lets loose the tiger within.

The result is *Menopausal Gentleman*, Shaw's Obie-Award-winning solo performance about aging and sexuality--a hilarious and intimate rage against the dying of her eggs.

"They say that women have a certain number of eggs they use up in a lifetime. I did it!" she exclaims with something like triumph.

There's not much to be said for aging gracefully in Shaw's monologue, part stand-up routine, part cabaret act. She growls and prowls across the stage, mopping her brow with a handkerchief, slinking into the audience for a lounge-lizardy version of "My Way."

"I'm made out of material that's a little worse for wear," Shaw says at one point. Her body is betraying her. She's drying out, one bucketful of sweat at a time. She arranges objects in her home to keep from pacing. Afflicted with insomnia, she tries to coax her body to sleep piece by piece, screaming at her restless brain to hear the soothing ocean rhythm.

"I feel like a middle-aged guy who wears his pants too tight and his shirts too loud," Shaw says, and like a middle-aged guy, she longs for love and intimacy (presumably with a twentysomething hottie, just like a man). "So many women, so little time."

It's funny stuff, and touching to boot. If you're 19, you may not get it. If you can see the crest of the hill you're about to slide down--if you're, say, 40--then you will, straight or gay, man or woman.

Review originally appeared in the Dallas Observer.

One-Act Deal in Delicate Negotiations, in the Music Hall and Home

February 27, 2002

By Lawrence Van Gelder

A couple of talented performers are having fun in a couple of vehicles coupled under the title "Double Agency," playing through Sunday as La Mama Experimental Theater Club celebrates its 40th anniversary.

The performers and writers are Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of the Split Britches Company in fruitful collaboration with two members of the Clod Ensemble, Suzy Willson, who directed the show, and Paul Clark, who provided the music.

The pieces are "Miss Risqué" and "It's a Small House and We've Lived in It Always," and if each component of this 100-minute show seems to run slightly longer than necessary, each maintains an admirable balance between cleverly conceived, spirited entertainment and intelligent insight.

"Miss Riqué" casts Ms. Weaver as a voluptuous blond French music hall star in the years leading up to World War II. Part Mata Hari, part diva, she is under investigation by a counterintelligence agent played by the short-haired Ms. Shaw, uniformed as a man. The piece is at once a study in role playing, gender, personal and professional seduction and the allure and illusion of show business.

Ms. Weaver -- changing costumes from a Niagara of white gown to one of deep blue, stripping to corset and gartered stockings, baring her bosom, dressing again, putting on airs and putting down Ms. Shaw, the clownish agent who goes undercover to offer himself as her professional and personal partner -- is a force to be reckoned with. This piece ranges among the realistic, romantic and absurd and is at best in dealing with the duality of an actor's life.

"It's a Small House and We've Lived in It Always" is a thoughtfully choreographed work that is splendidly enhanced by the bluesy music of Mr. Clark. With three chairs as its only props, little speech, some song and much meaningful movement and expressive acting, the piece casts Ms. Weaver, in blouse and skirt, and Ms. Shaw in shirt and trousers, as longtime cohabitants engaged in a contest for space.

As they move apart and then together, spurn advances and accept closeness, mime rejection and flirtation and reveal need, the two performers enact the ebb and flow of a universally resonant relationship.

DOUBLE AGENCY: Two theater pieces, "Miss Risqué" and "It's a Small House and We've Lived in It Always" created by Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver of Split Britches in collaboration with Suzy Willson and Paul Clark of the Clod Ensemble. Music by Paul Clark. Lighting by Aideen Malone. "Miss Risqué," directed by Suzy Willson, additional direction and music hall choreography by Stormy Brandenberger; sets by Annabel Lee; costumes by Susan Young. "Small House," directed by Ms. Willson; lyrics by Ms. Shaw and Ms. Weaver; costumes by Sarah Blenkinsop. Presented by La MaMa E.T.C. At 74A East Fourth Street, East Village. WITH: Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver.

Review originally appeared in The New York Times.

Salad of the Bad Café; That Championship Season

March 30-April 6, 2000

By Robert David Sullivan

When a recording of "The Stripper" begins and the woman on stage is already nude, what else can she do but dress herself in the most provocative manner imaginable? Lois Weaver rises to the challenge, grinding her hips as she puts on a white suit and transforms herself into . . . Tennessee Williams. It's one of several arresting moments in *Salad of the Bad Café*, a cabaret piece written, directed, and performed by Weaver and Peggy Shaw (both of the Obie-winning lesbian theater troupe Split Britches) with artist/poet Stacy Makishi. (Theater Offensive presents the Boston premiere of the show at the Boston Center for the Arts through April 8.)

Salad, the program tells us, was inspired by the works of Williams and Japanese writer Yukio Mishima, along with the Carson McCullers novel *Ballad of the Sad Café*. To judge from the physical humor in the show, the research must also have included a few trips to the circus. *Salad* begins with the three performers in oversized men's suits, each seemingly unable to control some part of her body. They make quick costume changes throughout the evening, and Makishi, in particular, goes through a dizzying array of characters -- including a geisha, a cowboy, and Elvis Presley. She also makes one entrance in a vehicle that's more compact than a clown car.

The slapstick is accompanied by puns, irreverent history lessons, and snatches of song lyrics. "My Aunt Pearl said my Uncle Sam died for Uncle Sam at Pearl Harbor," Makishi says early in the show. After doing Elvis, she becomes an atomic bomb about to be dropped on Hiroshima and sings "I Can't Help Falling in Love" (omitting the last two words of the title). "Are you okay? You seem disoriented," one of the other women asks her. The evening also includes lip-synching to Patsy Cline and Roy Orbison, a recording of Franklin Delano Roosevelt declaring war on Japan, and all three women dancing to the theme from the film *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*.

What the evening does not have is a clear point. The program calls *Salad of the Bad Café* a study of love in the "post-claustrophobic era" immediately after World War II. That phrase is new to me, but I assume it has something to do with the way the *Salad* characters break through the confines of gender roles and national borders. At the same time, certain American and Japanese stereotypes become sexual fetishes in *Salad*, and articles of clothing (kimonos, military uniforms, and the like) seem to impose their own restrictions on behavior. But a lot of this interpretation is guesswork. There are no moments that cut through the clever wordplay and Stormy Brandenberger's imaginative choreography to nail down a character, a mood, or even a strong sense of time and place. I got the sense that Weaver and Shaw simply wanted to work with Makishi, whose Japanese identity was an obvious topic to factor into the show.

Still, the three performers can hold an audience's attention throughout the loosely structured evening. Makishi conveys a sense of amazement at the movement of her own body, and Shaw has one of the most captivating deadpan expressions I've ever seen. Weaver has great fun with her drawl as Tennessee Williams, inviting the audience to "step right up for a sick and decadent tale of love" and opining that Japan is like the American South because the two places share a "love of the beautiful and the brutal." The portrayal of Williams, like so much in *Salad of the Bad Café*, is an entertaining but ultimately baffling twist on a familiar icon.

Review originally appeared in The Boston Phoenix.

Gentlemen Prefer Menopause

June 23, 1999

By Caroline Palmer

"MENOPAUSE IS ALL of your characteristics blown up a million times," warns [Peggy Shaw](#) one recent Saturday morning, her Boston-accented voice ringing over the phone lines with the sonority of experience. "So when you finally hit it, hopefully you have a lot of great characteristics." With this candid observation, the writer, director, and performer once described by the New York Times as "an East Village icon of lesbian butchness," begins to detail the physical and emotional maelstrom euphemized as *The Change*. It's not all pretty, but so what? Women spend most of their lives dealing with the fickle ways of hormones, and Shaw, a 55-year-old mother and grandmother, is certainly better than most at explaining--and even embracing--the "beast" lurking within. Her one-woman show *Menopausal Gentleman* just won an Obie Award and will be performed this weekend as part of the Dyke Night festivities at the [Walker Art Center](#).

Menopause, with all of its night sweats and mood swings, was a simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting experience for Shaw. "I had more desire than before," she explains. "I was wetter than ever. I was smarter. The earth made more sense. There's a feeling of being an elder." Of course, a downside presented itself as well. "For the first time in my life, nothing worked for me. I was totally depressed," Shaw recalls. "I couldn't do things that were good for me, like exercise or meditation. I started smoking, drinking. When I got really bad, I pulled myself up. It's just a personal thing about life. You know too much when you get older."

Shaw performs *Menopausal Gentleman* in a double-breasted suit, her craggy features and short-cropped hair evoking comparisons to a modern-day [Spencer Tracy](#) or a spiffy Sean Penn. "A woman passing as a man looks like a younger man," she notes during one monologue in the piece. "I keep young by passing, you see. It's a tradeoff. I sacrifice being a woman for youth." Shaw discovered this idea last year while performing off-Broadway in [Carson Kreitzer](#)'s *The Slow Drag*, a play inspired by [Billy Tipton](#), the jazz musician and bandleader who spent 40 years passing as a man until death revealed her secret, a discovery that apparently came as a complete surprise to her wives. During the production run, Shaw strapped down her breasts and sported a suit on a daily basis, sliding between the male and female realms with relative ease. When Shaw and collaborator [Rebecca Taichman](#) began working on *Menopausal Gentleman*, the performer's ventures into the testosterone zone naturally shaped the course of the show.

"All of the images that came to me turned out to be encased in this suit," she explains. "The suit held me together in a way." Such complexities of acquired experience inspire Shaw's creative choices as no formal education did. "I've never been trained in theater," she says, without sounding arrogant. "Everything I ever saw or read about theater never did me any good as a queer, and women have never fared too well in traditional theater."

After early years in an Irish working-class family where her father fostered a gender-neutral environment ("All the girls and boys had the same muscles," she laughs), Shaw moved from Boston to New York before eventually landing in London, where she met Lois Weaver. In 1980 the duo, now stateside, formed the acclaimed theater company *Split Britches* along with Deb Margolin and also established *WOW Café*, a vibrant women's performance space on Manhattan's Lower East Side.

After 30 years onstage, Shaw has learned that what one writes on paper is not always the same as what happens on stage. "I didn't know *Menopausal Gentleman* was funny, but when I first did it in

Boston, the audience was hysterical. Now I have to work on my timing," she says with wonder. "When I was younger, I thought you could control an audience. Now, if an audience reacts in a certain way, I think, 'Hmm, that's interesting.' It's like a relationship; I have to make it work for them."

Review originally appeared in City Pages.

A Sendup of 'Streetcar'

March 11, 1991

By Wilborn Hampton

There comes a moment in the campy drag show "Belle Reprieve," and it comes quite early, when one is forced to ask, just what is the point of any of the goings-on onstage?

The answer, of course, is that there is no point. "Belle Reprieve," which has moved from La Mama to One Dream in TriBeCa for an extended run, is billed as a "musical sendup" of Tennessee Williams's "Streetcar Named Desire." It is, in fact, a simple cabaret vehicle for Split Britches, the New York lesbian company, and Bloodlips, a London gay troupe, to sing a few kitschy and faintly bawdy songs and romp about in several pun-filled scenes that use Williams's play only as a point of departure.

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The musical part of the show consists of parodies of songs ranging from Muddy Waters and the Gershwins to British music-hall ditties, and includes a mildly ribald rendition of the hokeypokey. The dialogue is laced with tired double-entendres about genitalia, male and female, and the humor tends to find its own level. One routine asks the age-old question whether squirting someone with a bottle of seltzer or hitting someone in the face with a pie is funnier, and another concerns extricating foreign matter from someone's nose.

The two main roles are in drag. Blanche is played by Bette Bourne, a founder of Bloodlips, while the part of Stanley is taken by Peggy Shaw of Split Britches. In only slightly straighter casting, Lois Weaver, who also directed, is Stella and Precious Pearl plays Mitch.

The most successful parts of the show are some of the musical numbers. A takeoff on Muddy Waters's "I'm a Man" is quite funny, and an original song by Paul Shaw (the nom de chanson, as it were, of Precious Pearl) captures the spirit of a music-hall ballad. Another number in which three paper lanterns do a tap dance is lively.

But apart from the fact that the "Belle Reprieve" characters are named for characters in "Streetcar," and that the names of Marlon Brando and Vivien Leigh, the stars of the movie version of the play, are taken in vain several times, there is little to connect the two works, even as a takeoff. A couple of skits are set up by scenes from the play (Stanley goes through Blanche's trunk; Blanche takes a bath) and some famous lines are given a twist ("I've always trusted in the strangeness of strangers"), but on the whole there is little originality in the show.

All four actors bring a lot of energy to their joint creation, and fans of the two companies will doubtless have some fun. But even as a spoof, the level of "Belle Reprieve" is more sophomoric than sophisticated. Belle Reprieve Devised and performed by Lois Weaver, Peggy Shaw, Bette

Bourne and Precious Pearl. Inspired by "A Streetcar Named Desire." Directed by Ms. Weaver; musical collaboration, Laka Daisical and Phil Booth; set design and painting, Nancy Bardawil and Matthew Owens; lighting design, Howard S. Thies; costume design, Susan Young; stage manager, Karen Horton. Presented by La Mama E.T.C. and Drill Hall Arts Center (London). At One Dream, 232 West Broadway, near White Street, in TriBeCa.

Review originally appeared in the New York Times.

'Dress Suits'

By Stephen Holden

February 3, 1988

LEAD: THE most striking quality in "Dress Suits to Hire," Holly Hughes's bawdy farce of sexual identity, is the playwright's full-tilt fire-engine language. Like Sam Shepard, her most obvious influence, Ms. Hughes, who created "Dress Suits" in collaboration with its two performers, Peggy Shaw and Lois

THE most striking quality in "Dress Suits to Hire," Holly Hughes's bawdy farce of sexual identity, is the playwright's full-tilt fire-engine language. Like Sam Shepard, her most obvious influence, Ms. Hughes, who created "Dress Suits" in collaboration with its two performers, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver, invents rhapsodically raunchy stream-of-consciousness riffs to evoke characters whose multiple identities are straining to burst out of their skins.

"Dress Suits to Hire," at the Interart Theater, portrays a heated game of erotic cat and mouse between Deeluxe (Ms. Shaw) and Michigan (Ms. Weaver), two women who live a cloistered life in a rental-clothing store on Second Avenue. Their relationship is one long game of sexual charades during which the playwright and the performers send up 50 years of film noir vamps, lurid pulp fiction and lingerie ads. In one scene, Deeluxe, a hard-boiled drifter from Ohio, re-creates Rita Hayworth's performance of "Put the Blame on Mame" with amusing ineptitude. In another, they tango about their lair to the strains of Perry Como crooning "Temptation."

The play opens with an enigmatic Sheperdian stroke, as Deeluxe, against her will, strangles herself to death. We never learn whether the killer is an unseen man, the "masculine" side of her personality, or if the incident is merely the most extreme of the characters' heated fantasies. The rest of the comedy resurrects a tempestuous relationship in which Ms. Weaver (who resembles the 1940's Claire Trevor) endeavors to seduce the brassy, untamable Deeluxe, body and soul.

In revealing themselves to each other, Deeluxe and Michigan go from being tough-talking street molls writhing in sexy lingerie to using more elaborate metaphors. In a wild poetic riff near the end of the play, Michigan compares herself to the history of the state that gave her her name, remembering the days when explorers laid traps on the frozen ice and caught "monster fish."

While Ms. Hughes's more poetic writing recalls Sam Shepard, the campy B-movie side of her sensibility shows her to be equally in tune with John Waters's movies and Charles Busch's drag extravaganzas. "Dress Suits to Hire" lacks the pacing, suspense and structure of "Fool for Love," the Shepard play it most closely resembles. But in portraying female sexuality - and lesbian seduction in particular - as a carnivorous free-for-all, it scrapes away decades of encrusted decorum from a subject that is too often treated with a hushed sentimentality. And it heralds the arrival of a brash, promising comic playwright. Sexual Charades

DRESS SUITS TO HIRE: a collaboration by Holly Hughes, Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver. Written by Ms. Hughes; directed by Ms. Weaver; set and lighting, Joni Wong; costume design, Susan Young; choreography, Stormy Brandenburger; stage manager, Cynthia S. Baker; associate producer, Emily Hacker; supervising producer, Susan Waring Morris. Presented by Interart, Margot Lewitin, artistic director; Anne L. Peters, managing director, and Split Britches. At 529 West 52d Street. WITH: Peggy Shaw and Lois Weaver.

Review originally appeared in the New York Times.