

Performance Responses

Notorious

By The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein.

Created by The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein with collaborators Krista Vuori and Brogan Davison. Commissioned by Fierce and Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts. World Premiere performed at The Studio, Birmingham Repertory Theatre, Birmingham, 20-21 October 2017.

By Emma Meade Chapman



Fig. 1: Photo by Tim Fluck, The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein, *Notorious*, 2017

Shrouded in long, coarse, matted, white hair, three pendulous bodies are silhouetted against the black walls of the studio. Floating, as if by some supernatural force, these bodies assume a creaturely existence, swaying back and forth in the silent, stasis of the performance space. Slowly, and from an unmarked moment, small sounds become audible; sharp and high pitched, low and murmured, a progressive symphony of celestial sounds bring these soft, sweeping bodies to life. The glimpse of a thigh, the flash of an elbow, the glance of a bare torso; a beginning, a coming to life, a resurrection. The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein has arrived, and together with her two loyal (and aptly titled) 'witch

bitch[es]', she is ready to make one hell of a mess (Fig. 1).

Commissioned and performed as part of Fierce Festival (2017), *Notorious* is an episodic performance of explicit, excremental rituals, a spectacle of monstrous self(ie)s. Shaped by pop-feminist culture, social media and consumerism, *Notorious* interrogates the (s)exploitative victimology and duplicitous aesthetic standards of the displayed female body, as the artist aptly remarks of her performance: 'I'll be ressurecDEAD as your ultimate fantasy - a sexy, dead virgin'. This is an unapologetic action of resistance, and a forcefully visceral reminder of the powerful agency of the uncountoured female body.

There is no denying that at times Barri Holstein's performance can be difficult to watch. It is intimate and abject, messy and grotesque. From nude 'twerking' to Nicki Minaj, to mid air urination, the gradual disembodiment of a dead octopus, and the insertion and expulsion of confectionery into and from Barri Holstein's vagina, this is an unrepentant and relentless deconstruction of the myth of the monstrous feminine. It is a loud and defiant refusal to settle in a social and symbolic order which privileges the cis-gendered, white male body above all others. It is a provocative, corporeal exploration and exorcism of heterocentric narratives of monstrousness, victimhood, and shame. Barri Holstein, in her persistent and chaotic search for her 'true self', re-appropriates and reclaims the image of the female monster, there is magic in her mess.

Presenting her audience with a series of corporeal defilements, Barri Holstein's work depicts images of consumption and violation, a nod perhaps to second-wave feminist artists such as Karen Finley and Carloe Schneemann, who have undoubtedly influenced Barri Holstein's practice. Throughout the performance, Barri Holstein explicitly reminds us of her bodily borders, her orifices and fluidities. Hers is a body that devours and secretes, pleasures and repulses, exerts and retreats. Barri Holstein is all of and none of the creatures she enfleshes: she is mutable and transgressive, a liminal body who doesn't fit neatly into any one of the identities society has offered her. Just like the bodies of the witches before her, Barri Holstein's leakiness and

unfixedness signifies a frightening and problematic corporeal ambiguity for a culture which positions the hermetically sealed female body as the heteronormative ideal. Yet it is through this divergence and difference that this witch finds her power: she is productivity and potential. She does not seek to replicate and embody normative narratives of femininity, she is neither the Madonna or the whore, but an identity positioned beyond the boundaries of heterosexist fantasy and capitalist hegemony. Barri Holstein's body labours, it works, it (visibly) tires; and through this exertion and exhaustion her agency takes shape.

Manipulating Laura Mulvey's concept of erotic spectacle, Barri Holstein trades glossy, sexy, pop iconography for messy materiality, abandoning and subverting the artifice of hetero-feminine glamour and seduction. Confessing to her audience that this show will disappoint those who came to see the hanging of a witch, a virgin birth or a redemptive slut, Barri Holstein forges a multiplicity of selves which forcefully and irreverently challenge and reclaim the cultural and political power and symbolism of the female whore. Resisting pornographic spectacle, Barri Holstein's highly intimate and corporeal acts direct us to her humanness, to the facets of her 'failed' femininity, and in so doing to her body as an emblem of resistance and autonomy. Through her embodiment of the 'monstrous' facets of femaleness, her deliberate and irreverent "witch-bitch" rituals shamelessly deny the objectified female body's historical experiences of shame and victimhood.

Notorious pushes Barri Holstein's body to its limits, and in so doing creates a critical space in which personal and collective transformation becomes possible. Often visibly overwhelmed with confusion and distress, the *Notorious* audience wince, laugh and cover their eyes as Barri Holstein acts out her rituals of fecundity and defilement. From the 'birthing' of an eyeball jelly sweet from the artist's vagina, to self-flagellation with a dead octopus which only moments before adorned her head like a crown, Barri Holstein captivates her audience, creating moments in which dichotomous metamorphosis appears to be underway: both performer(s) and audience are altered.

Barri Holstein's work boldly threatens heteronormative stability, actively dismantling historical, mythological and contemporary representations of both female subjectivity and objectivity. *Notorious* enacts difference, defilement and disintegration, provoking the audience to ask; who is the 'real' Lauren Barri Holstein, and how is she defined and consumed by us, her public?

This performance is a re-(t)working of the monstrous female body. A chaotic, interdisciplinary mess, the debris of which is left on stage at the end of the performance; urine, sweat, regurgitated, disembodied sweets, the remnants of a once living sea creature, and the exhausted, naked bodies of the performers. But beyond this apparent disarray and anarchy is a carefully constructed critique of female identity and representation in a post-feminist capitalist culture, where, whilst dancing provocatively to the words of Miley Cyrus, *The Famous* Lauren Barri Holstein reminds us, 'it's our party we can do what we want, it's our party we can say what we want'.

Jack and the Beanstalk

Written by Joel Horwood. Lyric Hammersmith. London. 20 December 2017.

By Clio Unger

German Christmas is a solemn affair. While the pre-holiday season has Christmas markets and Glühwein and Lebkuchen (a version of ginger bread far superior to the British variety), the actual festivities are not known for their frivolity and whimsy. The ‘celebration’, a family only event, runs for three days and is not marked by excessive sociability: the music is festive, yet sombre; the food is rich, though adequately portioned; and there’s drink, but never too much. Considering all the real candles that decorate the tree the latter would certainly border on recklessness. As far as theatrical entertainment goes, the only Christmas specific traditions are the nativities staged at local churches and primary schools, along with the ‘Weihnachtsmärchen’, the obligatory children’s seasonal production staged at communal theatres across Germany, often based on popular children’s novels or films. Adults, in the mood for some holiday cheer, usually revert movies from the Anglo-America market; amongst my group of friends *Love Actually* remains unsurpassed as the go-to Christmas comedy.

This is all to say that there’s no German equivalent of the Christmas pantomime, no form with such a deeply rooted performance history. The Weihnachtsmärchen might fit the same bill as a theatrical occasion designed largely to make children feel comfortable going to the theatre, but a panto, an event that manages to captivate all age groups, it is not. Consequently, when I saw *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Lyric Hammersmith in December 2017, it was my second panto experience, and considering that most spectators were under the age of ten, I had quite some catching up to do.

My first panto encounter, *Mother Goose* at Wilton’s Music Hall, which I saw the previous year shortly after moving to the UK, had already succeeded in making me realise that Christmas in the UK had a different vibe than in Germany. But it was *Jack and the Beanstalk* and

its effortless merging of traditional performance style with present-day looks and contemporary message that made me appreciate pantomime as a contemporary form.

In a way, *Jack and the Beanstalk* has it all: blindingly bright colours, crazily inventive sets, cheerful costumes that make Dame Lotte Trottalot (Kraig Thornier), the infamous pantomime dame, steal the show, an ethnically diverse cast, music that is largely current pop-song adaptations, a woke political message, an abundance of garden vegetable puns, and, for good measure, a sprinkling of Caryl Churchill references and other theatrical in-jokes.

Written by Joel Horwood and directed by Jude Christian and Sean Holmes, *Jack and the Beanstalk* tells the story of Jack, casually gender-swapped and delightfully played by Faith Omole, her mother, Lotte Trottalot, and their cow Daisy (Kayla Meikle). These three try to comply with villain Squire Fleshcreep's rising demands in rent money, a sentiment that struck a chord with the local audience. Even though Jack has been able to grow three (!) carrots in Ye Olde Hammersmith this year, Fleshcreep's cunning and her soft heart soon leave her without any resources to pay their farm's yearly rent. Fleshcreep, played by the fantastically villainous Vikki Stone, is a thinly veiled allegory for shameless opportunism and gentrification, and his gleeful rendition of 'I'm in love with your money'—an apt cover of Ed Sheeran's 'Shape of You' is topped only by his scene-stealing woodwind solos.

The counterbalance to Jack's assertive optimism is brought by Fleshcreep's son Jill (Daniel Fraser). Having grown-up in an overly sheltered environment, Jill is ignorant of his father's exploits and harbours a pretentious ambition to become a thespian. He falls for Jack when she comes to the mansion to ask his father for a payment extension. His dramatic declamations and emotional fragility are beautifully complemented by his teddy bear jacket. Sewn together from at least thirty stuffed toys, this safety blanket come fashion statement is the ultimate parody of millennial sensitivities. In what I understand is a good panto tradition, these two are made for each other. But, refreshingly, when Jack eventually climbs the beanstalk, she does not

need him to be her saviour, and when he finally revolts against his father, he doesn't need her to fight his battle for him.

Of course, Fleshcreep declines the extension and Jack and Lotte Trottalott have no choice but to resort to milking Daisy the Cow. Daisy does not like to be milked, and who can blame her given the monstrous machine she needs to be strapped into for the process. Of course, the scene results in all three (and the first row of the audience) being soaked in 'milk' splashing across the stage in a perfect slosh scene.

After the unsuccessful milking, Jack has no choice but to sell Daisy. On the way to the market, she is inevitably tricked by Fleshcreep exchanging Daisy for three magic beans. A believer in the impossible, Jack places all her hopes in her haul. As is well known, she plants the beans, climbs up the enormous stalk, meets and eventually defeats the giant and his golden-egg laying duck. Order is restored, Fleshcreep has a moral epiphany and they all live happily ever after.

It is remarkable that this panto does not fall into the traps of casual sexism that the genre can be so vulnerable to. When Dame Trottalott presents sexual innuendo, it's done slyly and not in the usual over-the-top panto style, which deserves a nod. The 'white knight saves the day' narrative is cleverly hinted to but ultimately abandoned: the white middle-aged man plucked from the audience is not there to slay the giant but to play the reformed (and shrunken) titan, and it falls to a child to save the cast by cutting down the beanstalk.

The Lyric's pantomime is magical, but the magic it prompts us to believe in is not in the special effects, though those are brilliantly done. It is in the community of theatre. This begins with the interactions between the audience and the actors, the multiple opportunities for sing-alongs, the throwing of sweets, and well-worn audience call and response gestures, but it extends beyond that. The ensemble is chosen from the Lyric's youth ensemble, who go to great lengths to keep the energy up throughout the evening, and the profits from the donations go to local youth initiatives within the theatre. There's a decidedly homegrown and warmly inclusive spirit to this panto, which above all celebrates Hammersmith itself. Theatrical magic, the production

suggests, emerges out of collaboration, and even a panto-novice like me can get behind that.

Breaking the norms of silent spectatorship might be a challenge for the rule-abiding nation of Germany at first, but the overt jokes, the slapstick humour, and the well-known stories might just make panto the export alternative to marmalade and digestive biscuits Theresa May has been looking for. After all, it is about time the English reciprocated for the tradition of the Christmas tree.