

FAUST/ How I Rose. Directed by Martin Acosta and written by John Jesurun. 2004
Next Wave Festival. Harvey Theatre, Brooklyn Academy of Music. 20 November, 2004.



**Monica Dionne as Mephistopheles and Ari Brickman as Faust in *Faust/How I Rose*.
Photo: Jose Jorge Carreon.**

New York-based playwright/multimedia conceptualist John Jesurun has crafted a radically modern notion of theatre, in part by refusing to make sense or meaning of the messiness of contemporary life. His is a world of pixilated perceptions in constant flux-identities mediated through and potentially manipulated by the overarching media structures of everyday existence. Gone is the pretense of magic, cohesion and linearity on stage; replaced by material excess, incongruence and multisequentiality. Combining a sculptor's eye for beauty with a reality TV producer's lust for schlock, Jesurun's performance works interweave high art aestheticism with lowbrow tabloidism. He is most comfortable playing with extremes.

One such extreme concerns the power and pervasiveness of technology in Western culture. Rather than alluding to technological domination indirectly, Jesurun makes a point of including a wide variety of computer-based instrumentation on stage as a means of exploring the ways media forces intervene in, and at the same time, facilitate storytelling processes. As a theatre artist he is, perhaps, best known for his overt and unorthodox uses of interactive technologies in live performance- a distinguishing characteristic of a vivid imagination that has

garnered numerous prestigious awards and prizes, not to mention a MacArthur “genius” Fellowship in 1996.

Jesurun is also credited with composing dense, multidirectional texts. Each facet of his scripts is carefully constructed so as to allow for the articulation of various interrelated and oftentimes competing perspectives of technologically-infused realities. Though the voices and points of view of his characters are numerous, they collectively represent the singular vision of Jesurun himself: a celebration of and curiosity about the information threads running through networked societies. By directing and designing his own works, Jesurun is able to implement his post-existential vision on a grand scale.

Faust/How I Rose, receiving its American debut at the 2004 Next Wave festival at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, marked a departure of sorts for Jesurun, in that the production was collaboratively conceived and developed. He is credited as the playwright, set designer and video artist of the work, although his indelible fingerprints can be traced to other surfaces as well. Working in close association with director Martin Acosta and members of Teatro de Arena of Mexico, Jesurun’s updated version of the Faust legend traveled from earth (an apocalyptic war zone) to hell (a physician’s waiting room) and back again, with many other stops in between. More than ten separate locations were visited in the course of the drama, ranging from a psychedelic porno theatre to a virtual golfing range. In the program notes Acosta clarified the significance of the play’s topographical trajectory, commenting that the theatrical landscape represented, “ An immense imaginary geography at the service of a certain time and space.”

Textually, Jesurun approached Faust’s pact with the devil from the point of view of Mephistopheles, depicted here as a loudmouthed punk-rock/surfer girl. Faust, in contrast,

assumed the demeanor of a well-healed diplomat, a master of political argumentation, rationalization and verbal foreplay. As the work began we are introduced to these two characters after the initial deal has been struck. The subsequent action of the play revolved around an intricate and highly-charged battle of wits between Faust and Mephistopheles debating and dismissing various philosophical arguments regarding authority and responsibility. The seductive nature of their relationship (given the male/female heterosexual dynamic) often took the form of an intellectual exchange between dueling academics—a battle waged in the mind, rather than located in the body.

Given the philosophical nature of the issues presented, as well as Jesurun's penchant for wordiness, a certain degree of hypervocality could be predicted, and the production did not disappoint on this score. In this case, though, not only was the dialogue clever and current, it proved humorous and poignant as well. Mixing catch phrases, song lyrics, advertising slogans and snippets of poetry into a concoction composed mostly of complex metaphysical constructs allowed otherwise intangible ideas to become increasingly more accessible and exciting to a wide variety of audience participants.

The pithiness of the spoken-word text was matched by the visual sophistication of the projected imagery. Jesurun's versatile set design, comprised of shifting oversized canvases permitted the show's video content to assume a center-stage position. The imagery was lush and dazzling throughout. In one memorable sequence, for example, outlines of fish swimming across an iridescent sea framed the introductions of the two main characters on stage. The fluid beauty of the video montages contrasted with the sharp abruptness of the initial Faust/Mephistopheles interaction, permitting the audience to view aspects of the characters' hidden (or lost) selves that contradicted their public personas.

At the same time, many of Acosta's directorial choices did little to highlight the cleverness of the script or the dramatic impact of the projected imagery. Most troubling was the rapid-fire pacing of the piece and the sloppiness of its vocal presentation. Understandably, English was a second language for most ensemble members, yet the director might have toned down the actors' furious delivery, in addition to emphasizing the importance of certain words. Jesurun's texts demand tight control of phrasing and a decidedly urban-syncopated rhythm of speech. *Faust/How I Rose* lacked both.

Acosta's staging also seemed overly cautious and occasionally uninspired. He frequently positioned the actors in chairs along invisible grids on stage. As a dramaturgical device this geometrical configuration proved tedious at best. Further, by limiting the movement of the actors to a confined space, the projected imagery tended to overwhelm the stage environment, undermining Jesurun's fastidiousness and originality.

Less hesitation and a willingness to experiment on Acosta's part might have resulted in a more compelling interpretation of this provocative adaptation. In this instance, directorial inertia prevented the delicate balancing of thematic extremes-the hallmark of Jesurun's artistry-from being attempted, let alone achieved.

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