

New from Black & Red

Judith Malina's Poetry of Love & Politics

Peter Lamborn Wilson

2002

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a review of

Love & Politics, Judith Malina, Preface by Ira Cohen, 2001, Black & Red, PO Box 02374, Detroit, Michigan 48202, \$5 postage included, 84 pages

Love & Politics: a perfect title for Judith Malina's poems—politics of love, politics of the heart. Anyone who's ever fallen for the Living Theatre—that grand Kabuki of the avant garde—would want to own this book.

And yet it's not merely an appendix to the famous life work on Julian Beck and Judith Malina. It's also got some extremely sharp poems in it. It stands by itself.

I know Judith through New York anarchist circles. At some point in the past we were both dragooned into a NYC "Arts Section" of the IWW by the late agitator Mel Most (commemorated by Judith with an appropriately rabbleroxing elegy) along with WBAI's Bob Fass and a clutch of Living Theatre stalwarts. The Section evaporated after Mel's death but a sense of comradeship lingers.

Since I'm confessing bias I should add that another friend of mine, Ira Cohen, has prefaced the book with a wonderful prose poem evoking Judith's presence and voice. And the poems were published by another friend, Lorraine Perlman of Detroit, as the first Black & Red book published after some time. (Black & Red slowed down after Fredy Perlman died but keeps its back list in print.) And my own publishing collective Autonomedia distributes Black & Red. All very incestuous no doubt. So, don't take my word for it.

I expected certain things of Judith's book, for example poems on Julian's death—which indeed are here and even more moving and even spookier than I expected (such as "Return Summons," an actual ghost poem). Having heard Judith's own hilarious accounts of working in the movies I counted on wry comments about Hollywood like:

On the Set

Now they will ask me to weep,
And I'll turn into Hecuba for them.
And they will be amazed,
How I can make tears flow
Anytime they say "Action!"
So it is:
Action is suffering.
And it isn't much to them,
That I am suffering,
As long as I weep promptly
When they say "Action!"
Action is suffering.
The director says "Action!"
And I restrain only
The holding back of tears.

Like much of Judith's poetry this one works because sentiment shaped and held in by metaphorical wit never falls toward idle tears. One thickness of paper separates bathos from true sadness.

I also expected good poems about theater, and there are many. My favorite, "Dance Teachers," constitutes both a manifesto and an excellent poem, a rare combination:

Dance Teachers

From Beatrice Stavrova I learned
to reach, not only as if I were reaching
for the most beautiful thing
in earth or heaven,
but as if my reaching were
the most beautiful gesture
in earth or heaven.

From Maria Piscator I learned
that the upper part of the body,
grows out of the pelvis
as if it were a flower
which widens like the cup of the tulip,
and extends with arms and wrists
that petal's arc, while always
the pistil within
keeps the head rising.

From Valerie Bettis I learned
that the space of the stage
is created by the direction of the body,
and that by turning towards it
we can dominate every corner.

From Valeska Gert I learned
that the edges of art are irregular.

From Merce Cunningham I learned
to keep time, which can never be kept.

From Erik Hawkins I learned
to tie my sandal.

From Eric Gutkind I learned
that our unifying principle, Echod, is
expressed
in the verticality of the body.

The last line leads on to an aspect of the work I didn't expect, Judith's Jewish (even Kabbalist) mysticism, and the arguments with God (see for example "Graceless After Meals"). This puts her anarcho-pacifism in a new light for me, and in a deeper perspective.

In any normal healthy country (if such existed) Judith Malina would of course long ago have been declared a Living Treasure, and the Living Theatre would have been given a permanent home in New York.

Millions of people would know and love the real work of Beck and Malina, not the cheap horror movie jobs they were forced to take in order to keep the Living Theatre alive for a few more years. It seems you can either be prophets in your own country or make profits in it, but not both.

Continual "failure" defines the value of real art, at least for a few great souls, and even they are sad most of the time—but not always.

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