

Interview with Emma Valente (THE RABBLE): Staging a Queered Reinvention of the *Story of O*

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This article interviews Emma Valente, member and co-artistic director of Australian collaborative arts company THE RABBLE (www.therabble.com.au), who adapted Pauline Réage's controversial BDSM novel *Story of O* for the stage at Melbourne Theatre Company's NEON season in June and July 2013. The production sought to reinvent the perceived problematic sexual politics of O's story through a queer feminist lens, whilst working within the contemporary conservative climate. Such a reinvention offers the potential to move away from the traditional paradigm of seeing pornography as incommutable fixed texts, instead offering a plurality in which the monology of authorial intent can be challenged and the fluidity of audience reception and re-readings considered.

Keywords: Story of O, The Rabble, Theatre, Australian Collaborative Arts, Adaptation, Audiences, Erotica, Performance, Pornography.

Introduction

This year marks the 60th anniversary of the original publication of *Story of O*, the controversial French BDSM novel published under pseudonym which has never been out of print. The opening pages tell the tale of 'O', a photographer brought and abandoned at the Château de Roissy by her lover René, after a stroll around the city of Paris, where she is instructed to obey the orders of whoever opens the door to her. Yet this is not the only start to O's journey, as readers are offered an alternative version of the same beginning, in which O is taken by René and an unnamed second man, who explains that her lover will strip and blindfold her, before arriving at the Château where she will 'receive instructions in due course, as required' (Réage [1954] 1976: 12). Blindfolded, chained, whipped, branded and pierced, O is made constantly available for oral, vaginal and anal intercourse for a group of elite French men, which she views as a test of her love for René. Upon her release from the Château de Roissy, O attempts unsuccessfully to adapt her new sexual rôle around her pre-existing life as a successful Parisian photographer. Abandoning her career in exchange for servitude to René's step-brother, Sir Stephen, O undergoes a series of sexual encounters including a

failed attempt to woo and entice model Jacqueline to Roissy. Instead, it is her young sister Nathalie who falls in love with O, ultimately wishing to also devote her life to sexual servitude within the Château's walls.

In addition to the narrative's dual proem, two alternate endings are also proffered, creating once again a narrative plurality. In the first, O she accepts her sexual submission, and 'Sir Stephen and the Commander [...] led her to the centre of the courtyard, detached her chain and took off her mask: and, laying her down upon the table, possessed her, now the one, now the other (Réage [1954] 1976: 262). In the second version of the novel's ending however, '[t] here existed another ending to the story of O. Seeing herself about to be left by Sir Stephen, she preferred to die. To which he gave his consent' (263). This structure offers a plurality, a space in which the reader's imagination is invited to interpret its own story, and its own meaning. Indeed, having never been out of print *Story of O* and its subversive love story occupy a position *par excellence* in the literary history of sadomasochism, despite its undeniably problematic sexual politics.

Further, with the recent publication of E. L. James' media phenomenon series *Fifty Shades of Grey*

Story of O has seen a resurgent interest. The recent re-publication in 2012 of Réage's story in Kindle edition by publishing house Transmedia World clearly draws upon the distinct iconography of James' trilogy, its title preceded by the statement 'Before 50 [sic] Shades of Grey there was...' (see Amazon.co.uk n.d.). It is clear from perusing Amazon customer reviews that this media attention and re-marketing of the novel has been heeded. However it has resulted in mixed responses, with just under a quarter awarding the novel only one star out of a possible five. Amazon user Jayne for example laments,

I suffered this to the end, being a great fan of the 50 shades [sic] set, was looking forward to this for a holiday read. I personally don't think it was written very well, hard to get into. I kept going hoping I would get into it – I threw it away in disgust and will not be purchasing any more in the series :-((Jayne 2013).

Similarly, despite *Fifty Shades*' problematic issue of consent, the presumably male LittleWhiteAlphaBear comments in a review simply titled 'Horrible',

I hated his book – to start off with it was erotic and it was initially intriguing but then it became something else entirely. It's basically a catalogue of abuse levelled towards a woman who seems incapable of protecting herself. The big issue for me was that there is no agreement from her to be such a victim, she is forced into this and systematically, coldly, unrelentingly tortured by random vicious, evil horrible men. This really upset me and having read part of the way through I had to throw it away. I didn't think this would be in the same league as '50 [sic] shades of grey' but this is in a different ball park. Not a ball park I want to be in (LittleWhiteAlphaBear 2013).

Similarly, Miss Taylor decries,

I can't believe I paid nearly £5 for this book. I can't even be bothered to finish it, I have stoped[sic] reading it at about 40%. [...] It was branded as the next fifty [sic] shades so I thought I would give it a go as I really enjoyed fifty shades [sic] [but] The story of O [sic] is just degrading to women in general (Miss Taylor 2013).

It would be easy to poke fun at these user reviews for their lack of knowledge about the text through statements such as 'the *next* Fifty Shades' and 'not purchasing any more in the series', accompanied as they are by 'smilies', grammatical and spelling errors, however to disregard these readers would be to be guilty of such hierarchical positioning I have argued against elsewhere (Harman and Jones 2013). Instead what I wish to highlight is that what endures in *Story of O* is, at its core, the troublesome representation of female sexuality that lies therein. It is this which I think has both troubled and fascinated contemporary readers.

Interview

STH: You describe your performance as 'THE RABBLE in their element : feminine, provocative, subversive and beautiful.' How do you see your re-invention of *Story of O* as fitting within THE RABBLE's body of work thus far?

EV: *Story of O* is a pinnacle for us. Most of our shows have attended to the idea of female sexuality and the politics surrounding the representation of female sexuality and the body. *O* was somehow the climax for these ideas, perhaps because it requires such extreme representations, or perhaps because we had come to the end of a particular argument that we'd been fleshing out in shows like *Orlando*, *Cageling* (a version of Lorca's *House of Bernarda Alba*) and *Salome*.

So why the *Story of O*? What it is about the novel that continues to resonate now sixty years after its initial publication?

THE RABBLE have always chosen texts that we feel have resonated throughout the course of history, that have not only made an impact when they were written, but continue to make an impact for decades afterwards, texts that have shifted, corrupted or defined western culture in some small way. This is certainly true of *Story of O*.

We were also looking for a story that challenged us as theatre-makers and feminists, that made us feel uncomfortable and forced us to investigate subjects



Figure 1: 'We framed our show with a lecture given by the Sir Stephen character on the eroticism of language and disregarding the penis as the phallus'. (Jane Montgomery Griffiths as Sir Stephen, image © Guy Little).

that were taboo in theatre. I think this kind of friction/tension houses the best kind of theatre-making. I think that the main thing about the novel that still resonates is the ambiguity in O's motives to seek sexual submission. No reasons are given, no dark personal problems, it seems simply that she desires annihilation. This is an incredibly powerful desire, but sits uncomfortably in both misogynist and

feminist rhetoric, and can be read as both. In essence, we haven't worked out what to do with female desire that doesn't fit into 'normal' categories. I think this is why O still resonates today, the subject matter is still difficult and western culture (perhaps with the exception of the French) still have no idea how to represent these complicated desires without getting trapped within the gender clichés of the male sadist

and the female masochist.

Which literary text/s did you use in forming your adaptation? I consider of course, the *Story of O* to be the germinal text, but how about *Story of O Part 2 (Retour à Roissy)* and *A Girl in Love (Une Fille Amoureuse)*? What other texts inspired you?

We used some texts from the Marquis De Sade and a poem from Renée Vivien that we turned into a song for Nathalie. Otherwise the language spoken aloud was either from the source text or original. I was not so much interested in the other texts around O, like the ones you mentioned, but instead the context in which O was written. What it meant for a woman to write that text and what it meant for other women to read it. The most influential text was Susan Sontag's essay on the *Pornographic Imagination* [see Sontag 1969], Sontag really helped me to navigate the sexual politics.

Here is a copy of one of O's speeches :

O, O, O I have no regrets as my days and nights
gather speed, taking me towards the great..
I am the night voice
The invisible voice
The silent voice
Who speaks through the subterranean depths of
the imaginary,
These are the dreams as old as the world.

Dear Lover
I have written a letter
These are my words
In the letter is O
She is beautiful
In the letter I have brutalised O, I have fucked her
every way I can imagine
I have whipped her, inscribed with welts
She is nothing now
She longs to be nothing
Yearns to be nothing
So I write her into nothing
Her name smudged with my wet thumb
I rubbed out the letter many times – scrubbed at it,
tore through the paper with my pen
She's pathetic, She's a coward, She's lonely, She's

holding back all of us, She's rewriting history, It's
bad writing, why/ should /anyone/ read/ this.

Je suis
Je suis
This is my body,
This is O's body
This is O's body
These are my words
O, O, O
J'étais – I was..
I am... no longer
....O

How does your version differ from Réage's novel? Your site uses the phrasing 'reinvention'.

Our version is different in ways too numerous to mention. We are always trying to grasp hold of the essence of a text as opposed to representing it literally. Apart from a queering of the text. The main difference was that we framed our show with a lecture given by the Sir Stephen character on the eroticism of language and disregarding the penis as the phallus (Figure 1). We instead claimed imagination/fantasy as the phallus. Our ending was two-fold like the book. At once Nathalie (Figure 2) sings a song of hope and joy, whilst O – now too old for her body to be of use to anyone – puts herself out to pasture. Our version also drew out the Catholic undertones in the book, so that Anne-Marie's branding became a spiritual awakening/ sacrifice for O – for her God Sir Stephen. I also wanted to give O a strong voice, she is able to speak, she is able to leave and she is able to argue (Figure 3).

Tell me about your decision to queer the character of Sir Stephen, O's 'master'?

My initial question when I started working on the piece was : what is the cultural value of investigating the sexual subordination of women through a theatricalised version of the patriarchal system? For me, part of the answer was to subvert the dichotomy of the male sadist and the female masochist. To queer it, to "ungender" it (certainly a fool's errand) and then to move beyond the idea altogether. Masochism is not the natural state of femininity – but it lives large as a common fantasy in the recesses of the imagination for both men and women. Desire for submission or annihilation speaks to an



Figure 2: Emily Milledge as Nathalie, the child corrupted by O into preparation to Roissy. Image © Guy Little.



Figure 3: 'I also wanted to give O a strong voice, she is able to speak, she is able to leave and she is able to argue'. (Mary Helen Sassman as O, image © Guy Little)

idea beyond gender: that there is a profound human need to transcend our corporeal identity, our social body, our mortality; a desire for metaphysical transcendence. Can sex, or sexual fantasy provide ascension or does the reality of the limitations of the body make fulfilment impossible? If successful, at what point do we break through to enlightenment; where is our edge, our outer limit, our breaking point? Or is failure, in and of itself, the redemption we seek?

What were the challenges in reinventing O for the stage?

There are many many challenges. Some practical – how can so many sex scenes and scenes of humiliation be interesting theatrically – why would anyone want to watch? How can they be staged so they are convincing but not too graphic? How can we evoke the continual violence of the book without it being boring? Also, there were many philosophical questions for me. For example how do you comment or critique the representation of the female submissive without literally showing the violence inherent in representing a female submissive and therefore perpetuating the problem in this representation? Feels like a bit of a loop-the-loop, and it's incredibly hard to bust out of.

We also had to work out the practicalities of sex on stage. I was sure from the start that I didn't want it to be a flesh fest, but I did want it to have the potential to be erotic. We played with lots of ideas in the rehearsal room and found a solution where we would use rolling pins as dildos and pierce them through glad wrap that was wrapped around O and then film these actions in close up. On camera it looked incredibly realistic and a lot like the close ups of genitals fucking that you'd see in pornography, but on stage the artifice was clear, though still provocative (Figure 4).

While the reviews from critics have been overwhelmingly positive, one mentioned that audience members have walked out (Croggon, 2013: online). Was this something you anticipated? Why do you think that people struggle with the content?

I think the experience of watching our version of *Story of O* was challenging because it was theatre: you have

to watch it in public, with a group of other people. Because the show was made by us (a company run by women) and staged at Melbourne Theatre Company (a state theatre company with a conservative reputation) it became more difficult to dismiss as schlock pornography or trashy bad taste theatre. The show was also framed as an academic exercise by the lecture and by the program notes. It was also funny. So whilst watching the show an individual can never be sure of exactly what they are watching, how to judge the show, with which moral framework. I think this can be very confronting.

That being said the content of the show is undeniably difficult. There are scenes that look like group rape except that O has consented beforehand. We also did an extended whipping scene, which became almost unbearable. We hoped to allow an audience into O's mind and desires, but it's not something that everyone wants to watch and I was very careful to ensure that the show was publicised with the right kind of trigger warnings, so that people would know the type of show they were coming to see and could make their own decision. However sometimes people found themselves watching the show and they didn't want to be there, so they left. Once someone leaves everyone else in the audience is forced to judge their own participation/complicity in the show. This often created a phenomenal tension within the audience as they watched the piece.

Your reinvention comes at a time of increasing debate around pornography, particularly as I understand it within Australian politics and legislation. Was that a concern?

It seems that Australian legislators often mistake art for pornography. When we were conceiving the show there were two "scandals". Paul Yore's work was taken off show at a public gallery because police deemed it pornographic/offensive, and a revival of the debate over Bill Henson's work. We were also deeply entrenched in a political debate about sexism in Australian Politics, our leader at the time (Julia Gillard) gave what is now quite a famous speech on misogyny. All of these events definitely fed into O. There was a climate of dissatisfaction and frustration at a conservatism being displayed by our leaders. The fact that

we were given the chance to do the show in our state theatre company also signals a great change in our theatrical landscape. It was only a few years ago that I would have considered the idea of MTC presenting challenging avant garde work made by females an impossibility.

The author herself asserted that *Story of O's* 'sequel' ought to be suppressed. Should 'art' ever be suppressed?

I think art is all too often suppressed, normally by the artist themselves, in fear that others will want to suppress it or worse ignore or disregard it. For me, the most interesting art is when an artist breaks through a barrier of self censorship and presents a piece of work that feels risky to them. When this happens, sometimes social mores insist that the art work should be suppressed, if the art is good then it presses our buttons, makes us shift from side to side, sway in our seat a little, this discomfort provokes a strong reaction from the people or perhaps a community

at large. I think if the art is good it will withstand this pressure, even if it is censored it will resurface when a community is ready.

Finally, one review stated 'The pornography [...] is unambiguously pornographic' (Fuhrmann, 2013: online) would you agree? Do you think that in this case the community was ready for THE RABBLE's *Story of O* and its status as pornography?

I don't agree that pornography is unambiguously pornographic. The "pornography" that we produced was via a camera where it looked as though people were seeing graphic sexual acts, but it was clear from on stage that what they were seeing was a construction – rolling pins and glad wrap – everyone remained fully clothed for all of our sex scenes. You could engage with the screen content as pornography if you chose to – it looked real enough, but you were given the choice to deconstruct that image, to see it as a lie or to even find it funny.



Figure 4: 'On camera it looked incredibly realistic and a lot like the close ups of genitals fucking that you'd see in pornography, but on stage the artifice was clear, though still provocative'. (Mary Helen Sassman as O, image © Guy Little).

Conclusion

Whilst more than half a decade has passed since audiences first met O, a climate of moral conservatism still pervades around the story and its reception – whether that be English readers who refuse to complete the novel, or Australian theatregoers who walk out. It is clear that the *Story of O*'s status as controversial, sexually politically problematic pornography endures. As Emma notes however, this leaves those of us who choose to remain engaged in the text somewhat complicit. Clearly this model is not limited to *Story of O* alone.

However by re-inscribing O as an active agent of her own will, the hyper-masculine patriarchal figure of Sir Stephen and the act of sex itself as queer, THE RABBLE's *Story of O* offers an almost carnivalesque deviation from Réage's original narrative. Such a reinvention offers the potential for us as scholars and practitioners alike to move away from the traditional paradigm of seeing pornography as incommutable fixed texts. Whilst authorial intent offers us a dominant monology, we as readers can challenge such narratives with our own re-readings and individualised responses. Further, through considering the readers/viewers as audiences, and indeed interpretive communities, we can expand our understanding of the potential fluidity of pornographic texts.

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Acknowledgements

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Cast

Mary Helen Sassman as O
Emily Milledge as Nathalie
Dana Miltins as Jacqueline
Gary Abrahams as René
Jane Montgomery Griffiths as Sir Stephen
Pier Carthew as Anne-Marie
Co Creators: Emma Valente and Kate Davis
Director: Emma Valente
Set and Costume Design: Kate Davis