

I Turned Away and She Was Gone: A Play.

Jennie Reznek.

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Theatre performer, director and playwright Jennie Reznek is a renowned and acclaimed presence on the South African theatre scene. In her MA dissertation published in 2012, Reznek (3) writes that her study explores her “obsession with teaching the physical theatre body over the past twenty-five years”; it follows that her plays and performances emphasise the centrality of the body in theatre. Having trained at the Diploma École Jacques Lecoq in Paris, Reznek’s published articles and book chapters offer provocative discussions of the value of Jacques Lecoq’s work for South African physical theatre pedagogies and for creative work, particularly in how Lecoq infused her own creative projects at Magnet Theatre in Cape Town. Reznek is a founding member of Magnet Theatre, which “has been associated with innovative attempts to give physical expression to often unspoken or unrecorded memories and experiences” (Flockemann 134).

Reznek’s play *I Turned Away and She Was Gone*—published in 2019 but first performed in 2016—deals with the body, memory and womanhood as these forces shape the lives of three South African women drawn from pre-existing archetypes. These women represent not only a particular social role (mother, caretaker, nurturer) but offer narrative echoes of Greek mythology: Demeter, Kore (later Persephone) and Hecate. Or, as the play’s publisher’s summary describes it: the women in the play as incarnations of women that haunt each other in various ways. These women co-exist across temporalities while inhabiting trajectories that honour each women’s individuation process. The play text contains 16 episodes—or segments—of varying length that provide the thematic thread of the dual

process of loss and becoming who one is supposed to be (hence the play text’s references to the notion of individuation): “[f]or Persephone to become a woman,” Reznek explained in an interview on *Morning Live* (SABC), “she has to leave the mother ... to become the person that she is”. The opening segment of the play is titled “Demeter’s Dream”, while the last segment carries the weighty and beautiful title of “The terrible, terrible noise”.

Reading a play is of course quite different from watching a live performance of the same play (especially when the production makes use of video projections), but Reznek’s text is intellectually stimulating, evocative and emotionally involving. Numerous black-and-white photographs provide the reader with a clear idea of the set and the stage space, as well as of how Reznek—playing all the characters, including the Actress performing the characters in the play—would occupy and perform in this space. The text is also instructive and decisive in describing the actions and movements that happen across the stage, and how the performer would engage with the available props and décor.

Reading the play already provides a sense of the intimacy the performed play would provide, and that it requires; an intimacy that makes it possible for a performer to communicate themes such as ageing and the pervasive threat of abusive men to an audience in a safe space. Discussing her play on *Morning Live*, Reznek talks about how “audiences feel very engaged and very involved” in the play in part as a result of its use of space, and she discusses the myth of Persephone and Demeter as “[holding] many of the ideas we wanted to speak about”. Reznek extracts from the myth the interrelatedness of women’s lives beyond the social descriptors of daughter, mother, grandmother: Hecate was the one to witness Kore’s abduction, an event that is adapted for the play in a textual precursor to the #metoo movement. Here, Reznek highlights how women are caring for young children as well as for older women (Kore is abducted during the period that her mother Demeter is caring for Hecate). Reznek manages to give each woman her due as a character, yet it is Demeter who remains the most central character as she binds the past and the future together: while Kore pursues a burgeoning sense of self that culminates in the construct of Persephone and Hecate bemoans how she has been reframed in her advanced age (“I was glorious once / Until you reconfigured me as an this old hag”), it is Demeter who wears the Janus-face towards what was and what will be, caught between two women that she knows well, and not that well at all. In the end, this visually rich

and poetic play presents the reader not with an apotheosis but something altogether more rewarding and though-provoking: a thematically layered tale about women (and the bodies that make them) and the necessity of surrendering into a seeming paradox of vulnerability and strength.

I Turned Away and She Was Gone was nominated for four Fleur du Cap Awards, including Best New South African Script, and was nominated for a Naledi Award for Best Cutting Edge Production.

Works Cited

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