

THE LANDLORD FROM HELL: ARTIST DUO BODY BY BODY TACKLES GENTRIFICATION IN NEW OPERATIC PERFORMANCE

BY *John Chiaverina* POSTED 11/30/15 3:31 PM

All things considered, I enjoy living in New York City. With that said, it can often feel deeply absurd and almost unlivable, like waiting in a perpetual line for some kind of artisanal ramen that you know is never going to come. Just face it, there is no ramen, and *Time Out New York* tricked you. To zero in on this absurdity, you only need to examine one of the most loaded symbols of New York City gentrification: the SoHo loft. At its premiere on November 19, the New York-based artist duo Body By Body's new collaborative opera *BDSMozart* was about the relationship between a landlord and his tenants. It was staged in collaboration with Rhizome for Performa 15 and both set and held at an actual historic SoHo loft: 140 Greene Street.

BDSMozart's plot is pretty simple. Mozart is a SoHo landlord (played by Tomás Cruz) in the process of courting a new tenant (the NYC greenhorn, Captain Colonel Baby Boy, played by Jesse James Hoffman) while subsequently kicking out his pre-existing one (the artist Filomena, played by Eliza Bagg). The disembodied voice of 140 Greene Street (Jeremiah Nadya) serves as a narrator of sorts, booming an authoritative, almost demonically British cadence out of a PA throughout the show. Mozart is a SoHo landlord with SoHo landlord goals: retirement, getting his offspring into Bard—about this, he sings “the thought makes me hard”—and, finally, and perhaps most importantly, the desire “to produce nothing at all.”

“We told [Rhizome] a while ago that we wanted to do something about a guy who wants to get his kids into Bard,” Soren said later, explaining the initial genesis of the opera—the first for the duo, who in the past have shown work at Interstate in Brooklyn and Château Shatto in Los Angeles. “Because we got this whole thing about Bard, we really don’t like Bard. Neither of us went to Bard, but I’ve been to it, I’ve been to the campus, and I don’t like it.” (From here, talk briefly deviated into a discussion of



Jesse James Hoffman as Lieutenant Colonel Baby Boy in Body By Body's *BDSMozart*
BODY BY BODY

the band Steely Dan and their classic anti-Bard song "My Old School," which, although over four decades old, is rich with acidic details that still resonate today. I remember going on a particularly fraught road trip in 2009 with some kids from Oberlin that included a run in with a cute-but-excited Canadian border-patrol dog. After we somehow got over, I played "My Old School" on repeat.)

The show's narrative initially shifted quite a bit. "It started with that Bard thing, then it went to Mozart being in a loft, and I don't really know," said Michael Sachs, the show's primary composer and also Melissa's brother. "It kind of formed a linear plot over time." Part of this narrative development can be attributed to the group locking down a venue for the performance. "A month and a half ago we found the space, we responded to the fact that they wanted to have the paintings up, so we wrote that into the story too," Melissa Sachs said. "And these little baby chairs too," Soren interjected, referring to all of the weird children's furniture scattered around the loft during the performance. "We were like, 'Okay, we gotta put these into it.'"

The paintings—actually made by the owner of the loft—are attributed to struggling artist Filomena, while Cruz's Mozart is handled with a swaggering absurdity that's part Little Lord Fauntleroy, part the guy who played "The Wiz" on *Seinfeld* (nobody beats him). "The text honestly was a huge guide," Cruz told me after the performance. "It was great because it allowed me to be really outrageous and I think that just felt really good." On that note, *BDSMozart* is less opera and more "opera." At times, it reminded me of those ads for the financial-services company JG Wentworth that they often play during commercial breaks for *Maurry*, in which actors wax exaggeratedly operatic about the ability to receive instant cash from a financial settlement.

The music was an often-peppy general MIDI-pallated take on pop classical; many of the pieces had a jaunty feel that underscored the insanity taking place on stage: for example, when Lieutenant Captain Colonel Baby Boy brought his dog into the loft, it wasn't a real animal but rather a mostly nude man (Jordan Morley) decked out in S&M gear, overexcited and wreaking havoc. (There was no actual stage, but the performance made liberal use of the space, placing singers up in the actual loft and showing off the windows and sink the way an actual landlord would.) There was a point where members of the cast sang together a very telling line: "we're all part of the problem."

Although *BDSMozart* takes place within the confines of a SoHo loft, many of the themes—gentrification, frivolous upper-middle-class creativity—could've happened at a converted warehouse in Portland or an old toy factory in Detroit. With that said, there was no mistaking this for anything but a New York story. "I feel like a lot of the work we do ends up responding to a specific place, a neighborhood or a city or something," Sachs said. So, with that in mind, was Body By Body going to continue to stay headquartered in New York? "We're going to give it about another year, then I think we're going to peace out," Soren said, maybe joking.

The opera ended with Filomena's violin (which she had been playing at points throughout the performance) magically turning into machine gun, which she used to murder the landlord. Applause and roses followed, after which the "house lights" turned on, and after a short break, "Trap Queen" by Fetty Wap started to play (which made me wonder how much rap, if any, had been listened to in that loft over the past three decades).

“Its very generic, all the characters are super stock,” Soren said. The artist pointed to a recent review of Body By Body that “said that we weren’t insightful, and I don’t agree with what they said about that show, but with this, I would say this is not very insightful,” he continued with a laugh. “But that’s the point, it’s like a B-movie.”

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