

PERFORMANCE

## PROOF OF LIFE

January 29, 2016 • Jennifer Krasinski on Erin Markey, Kaneza Schaal, and Jonathan Capdevielle



Erin Markey, *A Ride on the Irish Cream*, 2016. Performance view, Abrons Arts Center, New York, January 13, 2016. Chenda Cope, Becca Blackwell, Erin Markey, and Mike Marcinowski. Photo: Maria Baranova.

**“ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE IS A ROSE,”** wrote Gertrude Stein, her most famous line dissolving the distinctions between a woman, a name, a word, a flower. Identity is, as the writer suggests, a slippery condition, and who we are rarely has much to do with how we’re called. In Erin Markey’s rousing and tender new musical *A Ride on the Irish Cream*, Irish Cream is a name is a pontoon boat is a horse is a lover, all borne in this production on the body of trans performer/writer Becca Blackwell, who is also Markey’s partner in life. One of the distinct pleasures of this joyful show is how it brings to the stage the vivid and dreamlike experience of intimacy. Markey doesn’t fall for the formulaic oversharing that weighs so heavily on American storytelling. Rather, she writes from the knowledge that intimacy is a song and dance of our own making, tightening language into codes between lovers, and sculpting the grand, imposed narratives around relationships into singular and precise stories we can finally call our own.

On stage, their story arcs as a series of sharp vignettes and soaring musical numbers (by Markey, Emily Bate, and Kenny Mellman), all fueled by Markey’s childhood memories and her present partnership with Blackwell. Markey plays Reagan, a girl-slash-woman who’s in a relationship with Irish Cream, Blackwell’s horse-slash-boat. Over the course of the show, Reagan and Irish Cream by turns seduce and soothe and challenge one another, while always speaking to each other in their very own screwball tongue:

Reagan: *Have you ever thought about kissing every inch of my body but with both eyes closed and two hooves tied behind your saddle? With your motor running on idle?*

Irish Cream: *Yeah. All the time. Like I want to just throw an anchor down and not waste any gas about it.*

Reagan: *Yeah and then reel it in and put a ski bobber on the line. And gun it.*

Irish Cream: *Mm hmmm. And peel around and bump on the wake.*

The girl-woman and her boat-horse come together and fall apart, a cycle that only proves the power of the magnetism that binds them. Markey and Blackwell are forces of nature on stage, giving so much of themselves to the audience and—perhaps even more strikingly—to each other. After an argument between Reagan and Irish Cream, in which they hurl insults

like “You’re a maternal spider and a prisoner inside your own barn!” and “You deserve an F!” they collapse, knocked out from the hurt. Irish Cream falls to the ground, their belly turning white; Reagan shouts for someone to call 911. Then, after a few beats, with mouths open and pressed together, they rise, resuscitating each other—two people entwined, for whom a kiss is a breath is life force is love.



Jonathan Capdevielle, *Adieu/Adischatz*, 2016. Performance view, Abrons Arts Center. Jonathan Capdevielle. Photo: Alain Monot.

**For performer/ventriloquist Jonathan Capdevielle**, mouth, breath, and voice are the instruments on which he composes an aural self-portrait in his entrancing and eerie solo piece, *Adischatz/Adieu*. Simmering just below the surface are questions about what it means to realize oneself in the light and in the shadow of others—about which aspects of ourselves are created in imitation, and which are received as inheritance.

Capdevielle begins downstage center, looking shaggy and unnerved while singing sweetly: “Holiday / celebration / come together / in every nation.” And then: “You must be my

lucky star / 'cause you shine on me wherever you are.” And then: “Papa don’t preach / I’m in trouble deep,” and so on until his medley of Madonna hits twists into far darker arrangements, moving from pop to Pop. “No, papa! No, papa!” he cries out in a gruff and ugly French ditty about a ten-year-old boy who gets fucked in the ass as the audience either giggles or goes quiet. A few songs later, he gives a near-angelic interpretation of Henry Purcell’s haunting composition for John Dryden and Nathanial Lee’s 1679 *Oedipus*: “Music for a while / shall all your cares beguile...”

In part two, Capdevielle sits at a dressing table, putting on makeup, a mini dress and a blonde wig, and all the while ventriloquizing conversations with his father (distant, disconnected, on the telephone), his sister Natalie (dying in the hospital), and his childhood friend Virginie (drunk outside a dance club near his childhood home). His seamless performance of self and others is brilliant, terrifying, and heartbreaking, because Capdevielle is somehow always second to the people he’s parroting. His father makes awkward small talk, which he mostly answers in monosyllables. When Natalie asks in a choking, wheezing voice whether he will return to visit her later, he quietly replies that he can’t because he has a shift at McDonald’s. “This town’s a real shithole,” he sobs as Virginie as we understand that in this place called home, Capdevielle was anything but.

*Adieu/Adischatz* doesn’t cohere the way it could. Capdevielle puts no fine point on his becoming, a choice which in some moments feels as though he’s breaking himself wide open, in others as though he’s just falling apart. Yet what condition is more essential to a great performer—living in the push-pull of the voices who at once made and unmade you, so that you can stand onstage, forever unbecoming to remain ever-present and wildly applauded for.



**Kaneza Schaal, *Go Forth*, 2016.** Performance view, Westbeth Artists Community, January 6, 2016. David Thomson. Photo: Maria Baranova.

**In the labyrinthine basement space at the Westbeth Artists Community,** where a taped line just below the ceiling marks the height of the floodwaters during Hurricane Sandy, a turntable plays old pop tunes before the beginning of Kaneza Schaal's stirring production, *Go Forth*. At one point, The 5th Dimension crackles through the speakers: "Oh tell me why was I so unkind / I still hope he's still on that line," they sing, "I'll make it up to him / if he hasn't changed his number / if he hasn't changed his mind." If these lyrics of longing are catchy and hopeful, what follows are heavier incantations for someone who is now gone for good. Schaal's show is her first as a theater-maker, and it was propelled in part by the unexpected death of her father from malaria. Performed as a series of seven vignettes lifted and translated from the *Egyptian Book of the Dead*, *Go Forth* is a meditation on mourning and the stories we've spun to make sense of loss, to believe and accept a loved one's unbearable absence.

The show opens with “A Hymn of Praise to Ra,” a recitation in pitch darkness that invokes the sun god as well as Osiris, the god of the afterlife. “Thou risest, O thou marvelous Being,” we hear after the lights have slowly returned, “thou art lord of the world and the inhabitants thereof; the company of the gods and, I, the deceased, triumphant, triumphant in peace, adore thee.” Other vignettes follow such as “Opening of the Mouth” and “The Negative Confessions,” during which the performers speak, sing, dance, move, and pray, bringing to life the words of the dead, always pointing us—orienting us—to the new world in which they reside.

What is striking about Schaal’s production is that although it doesn’t push past the grand, ancient myths to arrive at something more personal, every moment is precisely conceived and marvelous to watch. It must be said that the success of *Go Forth* is in no small part due to its extraordinary cast. Justin Hicks, William Nadylam, and David Thomson are such charismatic, intelligent, and nuanced performers that everything that happens in the space Schaal has carved out for us always feels beautifully, powerfully sacred.

— Jennifer Krasinski

*Erin Markey’s A Ride on the Irish Cream runs through February 6th at Abrons Arts Center; Kaneza Schaal’s Go Forth ran from January 7-12 at Westbeth Artists Community as part of P.S.122’s COIL Festival; Jonathan Capdevielle’s Adischatz/Adieu ran January 15-17 at Abrons Art Center, presented by P.S.122 and American Realness as part of P.S.122’s COIL Festival.*

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