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Review Of "Pugilist Specialist" By A. Shaplin And Performed By The Riot Group

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PUGILIST SPECIALIST. By Adriano Shaplin. The Riot Group, 45 Below Theater, New York City. 5 November 2004.

The 2004 American debut of the Riot Group in New York and San Francisco with *Pugilist Specialist* arrived after years of growing critical acclaim for the company in Great Britain. This belated homecoming is but one facet of the company's exceptional artistic trajectory. Based until recently in San Francisco, the Riot Group was originally launched by a small band of discontented undergraduate theatre students at Sarah Lawrence University. They developed a minimalist production and performance style combined with the baroque extravagance of actor/playwright Adriano Shaplin's language. The company, like countless other American student groups, started taking its work to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in the late 1990s. In 1999, the Riot Group began an ongoing winning streak of Fringe First and Herald Angel Awards with *Wreck the Airline Barrier*. They made their London professional debut in 2003 with *Victory at the Dirt Palace*. *Pugilist Specialist* (premiered in Edinburgh in 2003) has become the company's most discussed and visible work, with two critically acclaimed runs in London in early 2004 book-ending a five-month tour of the United Kingdom and Ireland. In 2005, London's Soho Theatre commissioned a new work by Shaplin and company entitled *Switch*

Triptych, with first performances slated for Edinburgh in August.

In *Pugilist Specialist* (whose title bears no literal relationship to the characters or plot), the set consists of a group of plain moveable wooden benches and a microphone suspended center stage. The benches are rearranged when the setting shifts. The four actors never change places within a scene, never touch, and never make eye contact—they play directly to the audience in a series of tableaux performed over Shaplin's own looping, digitally manipulated score. Any lighting cues are simple and functional. The elegant simplicity of the acting and staging is consistent with the earlier work of the Riot Group, a Brechtian response to their initial poverty, lack of professional training, and the need for high mobility for the work.

As with all of the Riot Group's scripts, *Pugilist Specialist* is simultaneously driven by character, plot, and language. The play revolves around the ultimately fatal betrayal of its only female character, Lt. Emma Stein (Stephanie Viola), by her poker-faced duffer of a commander (Paul Schnabel) and her two fellow Marines (Shaplin and Drew Friedman) in the midst of a mission ostensibly to assassinate a Middle Eastern dictator code-named "the bearded lady." Stein remains acutely aware of her exceptional position as a female Marine of great competence, confidence, and a history of speaking her mind to both fellow soldiers and superiors.



From left: Lt. Studdard (Drew Friedman), Col. Johns (Paul Schnabel, standing), Lt. Emma Stein (Stephanie Viola), and Lt. Travis Freud (Adriano Shaplin) in Adriano Shaplin's *Pugilist Specialist*, directed by the Riot Group. 45 Below Theater, New York City. Photo: Aaron Epstein.

"Punctuality is my feminism," she announces in her opening soliloquy. In double counterpoint to Stein, Shaplin plays an undisciplined, hot-dogging braggart of a sniper named Freud, and Drew Friedman is a laconic communications expert named Studdard, whose duties include maintaining an audio record of the entire mission being planned (hence the microphone above). In the bitter lesson on the nuances of status, power, and victimization provided by the case of Emma Stein, Shaplin and the Riot Group build on the line of work developed earlier by Brecht in *Man Equals Man* and *The Exception and the Rule*.

Shaplin's language combines soliloquies and monologues with quick, jabbing games of verbal one-upmanship that recall Mamet rather than Brecht. Ultimately, however, Shaplin's voice is unlike any other in American drama. Here he offers a bracing pastiche of military slang and pseudo-jargon, peppered with epigrams worthy of Oscar Wilde or Edward Albee, swinging without warning from the absurd, crass, or obscene to flights of terse poetry. A development and rehearsal process based on a heightened version of Sanford Meisner's repetition exercises that emphasizes verbal aggression grounds the company's stark Brechtian embodiment. Shaplin's writing both feeds and feeds off of this kind of work by the actors. Shaplin writes for specific actors (including himself), and indeed the organic relationship of actor, character, and language in the Riot Group's work serves as part of its power in performance. The aggressive, competitive stance of character to character is inseparable from that of specific actor to actor, and ultimately extends to the direct confrontation of the actor/character with the audience (where eye contact, if not verbal or physical contact, is permitted). In performance, the Riot Group actors in turn cruise, withhold, and challenge through their choice of focus.

The British and American critical response to Shaplin as a playwright has begun to take on a life of its own apart from the work of the company. The importance of Shaplin and the Riot Group to contemporary American theatre, however, lies not only in the appearance of a young dramatic voice of great talent and originality (Shaplin is twenty-six) but also in his insistence on the value and necessity of this kind of company-based writing. This is all inseparable from Shaplin's artistic work in other aspects of the company's productions (he functions simultaneously as actor, playwright, composer, and co-director in the Riot Group's work). To their credit, Shaplin and the Riot Group dare to fall between the cracks separating two dominant spheres of American theatre practice: the domain

of the playwright as independent contractor found in Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional repertory theatre versus the text- or playwright-scoring world of experimental *auteur* ensembles. Shaplin's unapologetic identification at once as playwright, actor, director, and composer further flies in the face of the artistic specialization and compartmentalization that the American professional theatre firmly enforces in both the commercial and not-for-profit worlds, as well as in training programs. The pitch-perfect shape of Shaplin's lines and speeches follows directly from the fact that he comes to writing from acting, and that the actor in him ultimately both inspires and confronts the playwright at every performance. In this embrace of the actor-playwright, the Riot Group in its downtown fashion revives and honors the actual practice of the Greeks, Shakespeare, or Molière more than any classical repertory company.

Shaplin's success will surely place him under great external pressure to simplify his own artistic profile and to distance himself from the very company—and its political and intellectual underpinnings—that has provided the extraordinary vehicle for his work to date. The Broadway and Hollywood systems depend upon playwrights as free agents, and the nonprofits have proven a tepid alternative—consistently timid, stingy, and conformist in their approach to process, much less content. The American homecoming of the Riot Group may prove as artistically and personally treacherous for Shaplin and his collaborators as their own Lt. Stein's attempts both to stand with and stand apart from the Marine Corps in which she serves.

Will they prove the exception or the rule?

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THE BLUEST EYE. By Lydia Diamond, based on the novel by Toni Morrison. Directed by Hallie Gordon. Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago. 20 February 2005.

Toni Morrison's novels tend not to adapt well across other media. Their frequent use of personal, retrospective narratives, combined with heavy doses of magical realism create stories that dazzle the reader's imagination but often fail to materialize visually onstage or on screen. Steppenwolf Theatre's recent production of *The Bluest Eye* seems the exception. Lydia Diamond's world premiere