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*A Little Life* (review)

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"This is the place. / And I am here, the mermaid whose dark hair / streams black, the merman in his armored body. / We circle silently / about the wreck / we dive into the hold. / I am she: I am he." Rich's stanza from *Diving into the Wreck* might have served as Coogan's choreographic score. In their striking red against the swaying fabric currents in pale flesh color, the performers dispersed into various blue-and-white corners, like pied-piper fish drawing schools of gazing anchovies around them. Now a mermaid pulled down the waves to hide her face; now a merman crawled about haltingly like a sea turtle; now she pensively grabbed onto another dancer's ankle, her arm an octopus circling silently; now he paused like a Roden statue, a red remnant left to rot in the wreck. Meanwhile, an intricate soundscape, melodious here and pulsating there, emanated from composer Emer Kinsella's bow, vigorously sawing on her violin. I heard Kinsella's music as the shifting tempos of deep ocean currents, but her music might just as well be low and high winds in an intestinal forest, with all of us the "sea-change" microbes inhabiting this "rich and strange" microbiome.

An artist renowned for her durational performances within magnificent installations, Coogan first produced *The Ladder Is Always There* (2018–19) for MOCA Jacksonville in Florida. Intriguingly, the artist was inspired by a coeval of Schlemmer, Marc Chagall, to create her mural. Chagall's costume design for the Ballet Russe's *Firebird*—a collection by the museum—had contributed to the mural's curvilinear blue patterns and her fabric sculpture's pale flesh color. Traces of the Jacksonville installation appeared in this Santa Monica "re-performance," a term that Coogan adopted from her mentor Marina Abramovic to identify her own site-specific adaptation of a preexisting piece. The shoes hanging from the ropes, for example, were produced by Jacksonville's celebrated footwear designer Joseph LaRose. The rope pulley system, with extra ropes rolled up on wall-installed dock-cleats, reappeared here, accessible for raising and lowering the wavy canopy, like theatre curtains. In a smaller CIACLA gallery, documentary performance footage from Jacksonville was on display. Just as Coogan referenced Florida in her source opus, so her site-specific California reiteration incorporated several regional elements. The CIACLA curators helped her feature local Irish artists—the musician Kinsella, the vocalist McGuirk, and the poet Minniti-Shippey—as collaborators. But Coogan's performers, recruited from LA-based dance schools, formed a multiethnic troupe, mirroring the demographically "mosaic" audience.

*The Ladder* was nonverbally enacted, but each performer occasionally made a bee line to a spectator and whispered something. Privileged with no

secret whispers yet remaining curious, I inquired after each whispering. A woman heard "This is our show!" A man told me "The North is next," and then helpfully added "I think that's a *Game of Throne* reference": *GoT* equals a veritable LA/US clan password! Somewhat irritated by this entertainment reference, Coogan later disclosed that all the whispers were verbal fragments inspired by Minniti-Shippey's poem *Belfast* (2018), which is a dirge over "The Troubles" (1960s–1998) in Northern Ireland. To Coogan, the "North" conjured up the recent amendments to the abortion law and the same-sex marriage legislation in Northern Ireland. While such mistranslation of politicized information is hardly unexpected in an intercultural context, sounds of Ireland, which transcend translation, were vocally conveyed by an ancient Sean Nos song, which McGuirk burst out singing next to another dancer enacting what Coogan called "the flare," in which a performer would raise and wave her red shift costume over her head in a spontaneous rage, revealing her leotard-covered writhing torso underneath. Another Irish language appeared silently, in some of the gestures that the performers palmed: ISL (Irish Sign Language), which was Coogan's first language as a hearing child born to a pair of Deaf parents.

While Coogan's key collaborators were Irish, her LA-based dancing ensemble embodied a slice of this metropolis's diverse demographic pie. As such, Coogan's theatrical piece provided a temporary cultural oasis for the region's citizenry, showcasing a microcosm of our urban life, in subtle defiance against the current regime's xenophobic articulations. The multitude of cameras on smart phones with which the audience voluntarily recorded the live performance exemplifies another posthuman ethnographic peculiarity, when the live and the mediated are intertwined and a collectively composed electronic archive often emerges simultaneously to accompany the live performance on social media. In this light, Coogan's "ladder" is "the real" that cannot be reached without mediation.

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**A LITTLE LIFE.** Adapted for the stage by Koen Tachelet. Directed by Ivo van Hove. International Theater Amsterdam, Netherlands. April 18, 2019.

Since its publication in 2015, Hanya Yanagihara's novel *A Little Life* has beguiled and challenged readers all over the world with its story of an unspeak-



Maarten Heijmans (Willem), Ramsey Nasr (Jude), and Marieke Heebink (Ana) in *A Little Life*.  
(Photo: Jan Versweyveld.)

able trauma leavened with life-affirming compassion. The acclaimed Belgian director Ivo van Hove's stage adaptation of the novel, written and performed in Dutch, deftly rose to the challenge of capturing the sprawling density of this psychological odyssey, as it was both loyal to the narrative intricacy of its source text and consistently imaginative in how it enriched its many layers. Thoughtful embodiments of the novel's key episodes, propped by a clinically sharp approach to storytelling, allowed van Hove's production to foreground and make concrete the visceral components of Yanagihara's work.

On the face of it, the 700-odd pages of *A Little Life* chronicle the intersecting lives of four friends from college: the actor Willem, the architect Malcolm, the artist JB, and the lawyer Jude. But the central focus remains on Jude, whose tragic childhood of abuse and suffering turns out to have left an indelible imprint on his adult life. Koen Tachelet's adapted script and van Hove's staging, although running to over four hours, economically replicated the novel's plot, tonal swerves, and rhythmic modulations, with a fine sense of what to jettison and what to dwell upon. Just as Yanagihara's novel begins in a light-hearted key, its attention dispersed evenly across the four friends, the play's opening depicted their relationships in rather innocuous ways, showing

them lounging together and dancing under strobe lights. The novel's third chapter, hinting for the first time at its interest in zooming in on Jude by way of his self-destructive habits, had its onstage counterpart twenty minutes into the production: after the first spurt of blood coming from Jude's forearm, the gentle conviviality of the opening moments could hardly be recovered.

Jan Versweyveld's design compartmentalized the novel's primary locations across the ITA's large stage, assigning a distinct but spare corner to each with an evocative set of props. The production's scenic minimalism was conveyed particularly through the empty center stage; the locational non-specificity of this sizable area, which looked like a scar tissue, allowed it to function as a psychological realm. Raked seating on upstage center accommodated an audience of about 180, who could be seen clearly by those in the 550-seat auditorium: such mirroring enhanced the audience's awareness of one another's disturbed reactions to certain moments. The stage was bracketed by two sidewalls upon which were projected continuous, slow-motion shots of New York streets. Besides making much of the setting explicit, these projections infused the play with a sense of interminable, almost doom-driven, motion.



Ramsey Nasr (Jude) and Hans Kesting  
(Brother Luke/Dr. Traylor/Caleb) in *A Little Life*.  
(Photo: Jan Versweyveld.)

An overwhelming sense of continuity was pervasive, seamlessly stringing together a great number of scenes taking place in different locations, time periods, and theatrical modes. This was especially powerful in those moments when an event in the present-day timeline referred to or triggered a memory from Jude's past. This intense interweaving of Jude's extended flashbacks with scenes from his present often turned the stage into an embodiment of his tormented psyche. Live music from a string quartet provided a feverish accompaniment to many of these temporally fluid episodes.

Ramsey Nasr's agile physicality allowed him to switch between different periods of Jude's life with ease and finesse: whether Jude was a naïve child or a weary adult, Nasr's performance conveyed his character's changing features—facial, bodily, and psychological—in subtle but effective ways. Even though scenes of Jude's professional life were absent from the play, he always wore the same blood-soaked, disheveled shirt and trousers, which represented his sense of entrapment in his defiled body. Whenever his scenes of nudity came to an end, it was always to that same outfit he returned; he kept denying himself clean clothes and a clean start.

Jude's numerous scenes of self-mutilation were deeply convincing but not without a see-through effect: whereas the audience could easily perceive the blood patches on Nasr's arms, his gripping performance created hard-to-watch illusions of self-harm. Whenever Jude was hurting himself, the surrounding projections would get gradually pixelated; and as he was bleeding, the video would reemerge with a pink filter, suggesting the sort of relief Jude was implied to be receiving from this ritual. In the aftermath of these scenes, either Andy or Harold—two of the play's caregiving characters—would clean the floor patiently, delivering monologues that both propelled the plot and meditated on loss and mourning.

While Jude came to occupy a central position in the play, Malcolm and JB were exponentially reduced to silent and symbolic presences. Given that the novel displays the same pattern, although much less acutely, this was hardly a weakness of the adaptation, but it did make dangling appendages of these two characters. Conversely, as Willem grew more prominent, his relative unimportance in the play's first act appeared off-kilter. By the time he became Jude's romantic partner, the audience had learned very little about him, which prevented the intricate intimacy of their relationship from flourishing in performance.

While the novel allows readers to pace themselves through Jude's long and disturbing story, the production placed greater demands on viewers' attention and stamina by exposing them to the same material without offering much chance for relief. Complicit in this effect were the corporeal elements of performance that made Yanagihara's grisly descriptions even more searing: seeing Jude's naked, breathing body repeatedly thrown around the stage by his assaulters (each played brilliantly, and distinctly, by Hans Kesting) and then whipped, penetrated, and burned in graphic ways was surely a stressful experience for many in the audience. Yet as harrowing as the production felt, ultimately nothing was done against the grain of the novel's spirit. Even the less extreme aspects of the staging amounted to a well-calculated and unhurried amplification of what was otherwise drawn out and diffuse in Yanagihara's work. At once efficient and poetic, tight and complex, van Hove's superb adaptation of this contemporary epic made the most of the theatrical medium to magnify its aching but throbbing heart.

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**PARIS DES FEMMES FESTIVAL.** Paris, France.  
January 10–12, 2019.

On Saturday, January 12, 2019, as had been happening all over France every weekend since the previous November, a yellow-vest protest against the Macron government took place just a short distance from La Pépinière théâtre where the eighth edition of the Paris des Femmes (Paris of Women) Festival was being held. Protesting among other things crippling taxes and stagnant salaries, the working-class marchers converged upon Paris from the overlooked and left-behind rural areas of France wearing their symbolic neon-yellow visibility vests in order to "be seen." Police in riot gear filled the