



Joseph Keckler's
*Train With
No Midnight*,
PROTOTYPE Festival,
HERE, New York,
2020. Photo: Paula
Lobo. Courtesy of
the artist

JOSEPH KECKLER

SUSPENDED IN AIR

A Preface to Train With No Midnight

I'm writing in April and you're reading in October or beyond. It's a peculiar fact that anything written during this early era of the coronavirus pandemic will inevitably be a time capsule, since reality is shifting so dramatically and so regularly. Journal entries I made last week already seem like documents from a distant moment: not a more innocent moment, exactly, but a different freeze frame of cataclysm, since every moment of a crisis always seems to be suspended in air, each one implying a different set of possibilities and outcomes for what's next. Anyway, I wish I weren't some batty voice from the past, but a messenger from the future instead. Then I could tell you precisely how to change course, or issue instructions for a certain fateful date. Well, I am sorry, but I've been asked to tell you about my show, to frame the preface within the current circumstance we're living in, and to write across time, even though time is now stormy.

Train With No Midnight resonates with right now in a number of ways, since it is a show largely about timelines, collapse, the ravages and fatigues of capitalism, an uncategorized spiritual longing for transformation, and, as the editor of this magazine succinctly put it, "the disappearance of one era and forward-lurching into another, unknown journey that is just beginning." The show courts the very sense of an unstable reality that has come to rule our lives—one moment, preparing for apocalypse feels ridiculous, and the next it feels ridiculous you weren't preparing more. One moment your friend is a surefooted atheist, and the next she is trembling, asking you if Jesus is coming soon, a religious relapse. To me, the show is about such shifts.

But what exactly is the show, and what is in it? *Train With No Midnight* is a dreamlike travelogue, a strange family of songs and vignettes about things that *didn't happen*: the 2012 apocalypse that didn't come to pass, a relationship that falls apart, the widely anticipated reality of Hillary Clinton's election in 2016, and a false miracle at the feet of a small-town Christmas display. (And while I hope it radiates an aura of great mystery, the title *Train With No Midnight* arises from a literal event, as you will see.)



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The show snakes through various locations—Paris, Times Square, Hamburg, the Midwest—while calling up incidents from my daily life that spiral out to larger themes. At the center of it all is New Year's Eve, a symbolical ritual of transformation, a holiday that represents the future.

Musically, the show glides and jerks around from achy, witchy pop ballads to operatic arias to a driving production number with a chorus of laughing rats. These songs are, at turns, delivered in English, German, French, a nonsense language, English spoken backward, and Ancient Greek. For me, language and compositional style used to be connected—for instance, I'd use German when imitating a Schubert song or Italian for something vaguely Verdi-like, and so on. In *Train With No Midnight*, though, I floated away from any direct stylistic connection. I treated this multilingualism as just another

way to travel and also as a gesture that places the personal at a distance, a way to render my own remembered experiences as foreign. I also seem to want to make things unnecessarily difficult, and having to perform a story about my 2012 New Year's Eve in Ancient Greek achieves that.

As we developed the piece, dramaturg Erika Rundle, director Elizabeth Gimbel, and I spoke a lot about the crossroads. We spoke of the crossroads as a place of danger and possibility, a place of reckoning and transformation, a space between worlds. That's where we are right now. As the economy fails, some are calling for normal life to resume. But this crisis has already exposed so much inequity, dysfunction, mania, and rot. So others are taking a step back from Normal Life. And we're looking at it like a house we thought we loved, but now with the furniture gone it just looks empty and anonymous; the ceiling is close to falling. With this revelation, a lot of people are envisioning ways we could transform. Flashes of clarity, I know, often precede resignation, fear, pain, weariness, and the apparent sealing of a dismal fate. But in my life, I've never experienced such an articulated collective desire. My question to you is: What has changed, and who and what remains? If I can tell you anything, it is that here, in April 2020, there's a feeling of possibility. I want to open a portal to that.