Reza Abdoh Today
Posthumous Reflections Fifty-Five Years after His Birth

Joseph Cermatori

It is only for the sake of those without hope that
hope is given to us.
Walter Benjamin

Do not give me a memorial if I die.
Give me a demonstration.
David Wojnarowicz

June 2018: Two days after my visit to the Reza Abdoh retrospective at MoMA PS1, the United States announces it will withdraw from the UN Human Rights Council. Meanwhile “detention centers” have begun appearing in cities along the U.S.-Mexico border where Latin-American children are being forcibly separated from their refugee parents. According to the latest reports (from The Nation, The Washington Post, the L.A. Times, and The Texas Tribune) the number of those detained in violation of both domestic and international law is in the thousands. A former Walmart store has been pressed into this effort and now bears the Orwellian name “Casa Padre.” Terrified children now appear in cages in our daily news digest.

“Who will be the witness?” asks a voice in the script of Abdoh’s theatre piece Tight Right White. Who indeed.

Preserved in PS1’s retrospective, his work signals to us through the flames of our political present some two decades after his death in 1995. He was only thirty-two then, with the AIDS epidemic in full swing. Elinor Fuchs first introduced me to his work on VHS tape a decade ago when I was a Yale graduate student. She wrote in The Village Voice one year before he died: “The woe and horror of history as ruination come pouring, choking, rasping out in the disconnected fragments of Reza Abdoh’s Quotations from a Ruined City. ‘Sarajevo!’ it screams.”
‘Beirut!’ And now Los Angeles, and now the concentration camps, the world as camp.” Arguing that Abdoh’s work built upon the theatrical postmodernisms of Foreman, Breuer, Wilson, and LeCompte, Fuchs maintained that he parted ways from these precursors by incorporating a greater sense of history, particularly history as ruinous process. Sarajevo, Beirut, Los Angeles . . . Casa Padre? What might Abdoh have to teach us today, when the Texas border cities of McAllen, Los Fresnos, and Tornillo are now part of the calamitous lineage Quotations itself quotes?

Abdoh’s theatre refused any easy solutions of the sort we might seek for this question, but at the same time, it always rejected the comforts of passivity. He offered no answers that could form bridges to happier futures; he promised nothing, but still risked the near hopelessness of artistic production in times of smothering unfreedom. When asked by Howard Ross Patlis in an interview for Theatre Week, “What is it you want to communicate to your audience?” he replied, “That it is not enough to think of a world that is more livable . . . but that you have to act on it.” A deep, unfashionably humanistic pulse animated his nightmare vision of life, only quickened by his AIDS diagnosis. The mature pieces that flowed from that pulse—The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice (1990); Bogeyman (1991); The Law of Remains (1992); Tight Right White (1993); and Quotations from a Ruined City (1994)—amount to some of the most challenging and advanced works of theatre seen in this country over the past thirty years. (PAJ Publications was among the first to pay them fervent attention throughout the nineties, in the journal; in the Art+Performance series volume, Reza Abdoh, edited by Daniel Mufson; and as a selection in the anthology Plays for the End of the Century, edited by Bonnie Marranca.)

PSI’s retrospective now reflects Abdoh’s legacy from a cultural present he presciently foresaw, but also from an institutional framework he likely would not have predicted. With this exhibit, MoMA continues its curatorial work of bringing performance under the institutional dominion of the visual arts, as it did most successfully in its 2010 Marina Abramović retrospective The Artist is Present. Except of course, with Abdoh, the artist is absent. Death haunts these gallery spaces just as it has been known to haunt the theatre foundationally. Unlike Abramović, Abdoh always clearly identified as a theatre artist, working in proscenium, site-specific, and black box spaces rather than white-walled galleries. Nevertheless, both artists strove toward a vision of performance that would be unrepeatable (although Abdoh remounted and travelled with his plays, he forbade any new productions of them after his death), creating work opposed to the commodifying and institutionalizing logics of the professional art world. And yet against all odds and through a series of “re-stagings,” both have now been fully incor-
porated into the all-consuming space of the modern museum. Nayland Blake was, I believe, the first to make this point about Abramović’s retrospective, but this fact is even more unusual for Abdoh, who was always closer to the theatrical canon—Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, Beckett, Müller, Brenton—than to that of the visual arts.

It is bittersweet to see Abdoh’s work thus memorialized. No American playwright or director has appeared since his death who can rival his aesthetic and moral vastness or his technical precision. During a day-long festival in his honor at CUNY’s Martin E. Segal Center, in 2011, several theatre directors who studied formatively under him freely confessed that his work set an impossibly high bar. This is not because, as one collaborator pronounced that day, it was “hardcore” or “punk rock,” though it undeniably was. Rather, Abdoh’s dramaturgy still impresses and shocks us today because it was also unapologetically philosophical and poetic, ruthlessly engaged with its historical precedents, and unflinchingly committed to its own aesthetic and political force. The poignancy of PS1’s retrospective stems from the joyful fact of a well-deserved recognition being conferred and the sad reality that the theatre (both as medium and institution) is poorly equipped to do the conferring on its own. Instead that task has been taken up by museums with little insight, whether curatorial or phenomenological, into how the theatre works at a fundamental level. This is to say nothing of the institutional politics of major visual arts museums. One can only wonder how Abdoh might have regarded his accession into the space of MoMA given the marginal realms where he spent his life, or how he might have responded to his elevation as a major artist when he once alleged, “What’s radical is in the streets, the war in Iraq is radical. The avant-garde no longer exists.”

Curatorially speaking, the PS1 show has been handsomely but not expertly hung. It totals six rooms, with three of them occupied by large-scale video projections documenting four of Abdoh’s major plays, all filmed by his longtime collaborator Adam Soch, who has more recently produced the documentary Reza Abdoh: Theatre Visionary. The Law of Remains and Quotations from a Ruined City share a single room, though during my visit Quotations was not playing; whether by accident or by design was not clear. Bogeyman, Abdoh’s most mammoth work, plays in the largest room in three channels, allowing different facets of the stage picture to be viewable simultaneously. Tight Right White, his most inflammatory and racially charged work, noticeably does not receive a large-scale treatment here. Conveying the performances’ sheer immensity at a cinematic scale, the setup also captures the intense loudness of Abdoh’s acoustic landscape, full of shrieks and howls, guttural invective, electric guitar noise, odd sound effects, and canned music. But since these larger rooms are barely separated, the overwhelming cacophony...
makes it difficult to catch the significantly quieter moments of the productions. And Abdoh’s own soft-spoken voice, featured in a fourth room in both large and small-scale recordings of collected offstage moments, often drowns in the engulfing din.

Beyond Soch’s video documentation, PS1 fills the two remaining rooms, shaped like flanking corridors, with historical and biographical timelines, scripts, videos, a few scrapbooks and notebooks, and a wealth of photographs. This material is for the most part confusingly organized, in both wings split needlessly between two facing walls, forcing the museumgoer to zigzag repeatedly across the spaces in order to grasp a sequential narrative. All the same, it is a marvel to see footage of Abdoh’s lesser known, early directing works—including his adaptations of *Oedipus* and *Medea*—and to observe in them his gift for commanding stage image and action. Here he was working on a far smaller scale than in the later works, which rival Robert Wilson’s stage productions in their massiveness and grandeur. But these intimate early works are presented on small monitors, sometimes perched at an inexplicable height, and with all the ambient noise in the gallery the viewer often has difficulty following them. When the exhibit moves this winter to its partner museum, the KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, one hopes for a more spacious, streamlined, and soundproofed layout.

Beyond curatorial issues, the phenomenology of the theatre itself proves a blind spot at MoMA PS1. Here again the tensions between performance art and what has been called postdramatic theatre are visible in high relief, but nowhere meaningfully considered. Klaus Biesenbach, PS1’s director, has sometimes asserted that with performance, “you have a knife and it’s your blood,” whereas with theatre, “it’s ketchup.” This claim for the greater, practically self-evident appeal of performance demonstrates in itself the art world’s ignorance of theatre’s darkest and most unsettling capacities, which Abdoh knew only too intimately. He was undeterred by the embarrassment of ketchup, unintimidated by the falseness of the *faux*. His works overflowed with stage blood of the most conspicuous sort. One thinks of the Grand Guignol effects of *The Law of Remains*, Abdoh’s ritualistic tribute to the serial murderer Jeffrey Dahmer, with Tom Pearl repeatedly “stabbing” and slavering over the exposed abdomen of Brendan Doyle, covered in what looks like red Karos syrup. For all the falsity on flagrant display, the energy propelling these works was no less authentic and shocking than that powering Abramović’s most fearless actions.

Anyone who has lived through the video recording of *Law of Remains*—with its pyrotechnic, screaming chorus of “Stick me / lick me / prick me / hack me / eye me / knife me / crack me / nick me / trash me / stash me / stew me / cook me / choke me / poke me / sting me / shit me,” and on and on—knows all this

Courtesy PAJ Publications Archive.


*Quotations From a Ruined City*, 448 West 16th Street, New York, 1994. Photo: Paula Court.
unshakably to be the case. (“I am not so interested in how the actors ‘play act’ their roles but how they live them onstage,” Abdoh’s stage directions inform us. He might have said, “how they suffer them onstage.”) Stage blood and all, the fact that Abdoh’s work now appears at PS1 in a show co-curated by Biesenbach (in collaboration with the journal Bidoun) is proof of the contradictions internal to the art world’s persistent anti-theatrical prejudices.

Lingering over the retrospective’s behind-the-scenes footage, I catch myself reflecting on my own first encounter with Soch’s recordings of Abdoh’s devastating plays. Like others of my generation I was too young to see these works live in performance and can never fully shake the sadness of having missed them. I was haunted then, as now, by the opening stage picture of the first Abdoh work I watched on VHS, Quotations from a Ruined City: the image of Tony Torn and Tom Fitzpatrick dressed as two Calvinist Puritans in black Jacobean waistcoats, neck ruffs, and ghoulish whiteface, their heads poking out of rectangular windows as though they were Beckett characters. “His theater was baroque,” claims Hans-Thies Lehmann of Abdoh in Postdramatic Theater, alluding to the theatre of The Origin of German Trauerspiel (a claim echoed elsewhere by Elinor Fuchs and John Bell). I was just reading both of those texts for the first time in those days, and could only begin to speculate at their connections to each other and to Abdoh’s gruesome cycle.

After Quotations, I tore through all of Soch’s recordings in the span of just a few days, propelled by a sense of urgency I’d only known before on first encountering Sarah Kane’s plays or Romeo Castellucci’s Tragedia Endogonidia. Of Abdoh’s peers, only those two artists seemed to match his ferocious magnitude. With all three, I felt immediately I was experiencing a form of theatre I’d never conceived before, and yet one that clearly built upon the long history of modernist theatrical experiment. Regarding this history, we can recognize it as a paradox of Abdoh’s artistic singularity that so many attempts were made during his short life to locate him within a tradition of dark, underground artistic genius. Perusing the contributions in PAJ Publications’ volume, one finds references to Brueghel, Bosch, de Sade, Goya, Baudelaire, Rimbaud, the Surrealists, Bataille, Francis Bacon, Jean Genet, The Ridiculous Theatre, Jack Smith, Squat Theatre, and many others besides. Against all the perils of historical transmission, a tradition is something passed on and transformed from generation to generation, a bequest of sorts, and Abdoh was a clear and favored inheritor to this one. All the same, the limited circulation of his work has left him few if any genuine heirs of his own in the American theatre, though the work of certain queer millennial multimedia artists like Ryan Trecartin and Jacobly Satterwhite bears a family resemblance of sorts.
There was above all an immediate critical tendency to associate his works with Antonin Artaud’s aesthetics, as Marvin Carlson detected early on. “Scarcely a review of Abdoh’s two more recent New York works has failed to evoke Artaud,” Carlson wrote, “and the overwhelming sensual assault of these productions, their thrusting upon the stage precisely those elements in our private imaginations and social constructions that we would most like to suppress (not to mention the frequent specific images of torture, graphic violence, and bloodshed) perhaps inevitably stimulate associations with Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.” Far more than Brecht’s cool and calculating dialecticism, it was Artaud’s theatre of plagues that held sway with Abdoh, an influence rendered even more demanding by the biopolitical disaster of AIDS. Artaud authorized his eagerness to plunge spectators bodily into an environmental or immersive trial, to assault their senses with ideas as sensuous and material forces, to transform them at a level both material and metaphysical, denying all Cartesian dualism. But it was Artaud tempered with a touch of camp, as one can see from a play like Bogeyman, with its unavoidable Bride-of-Frankenstein fright wig. With Abdoh, the time of Halloween became the space of the stage, full of genuine horror and wacky kitsch, though perhaps not in equal dole.

“In this slippery world which is committing suicide without noticing it, there can perhaps be found a nucleus of men capable of imposing this superior vision of the theatre, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magical equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe.” So wrote Artaud, with words that just as easily pertain to our contemporary world and Abdoh’s own practice. As with Artaud’s theatre of dark, ritual magic, Abdoh aimed to generate shocks that could halt our society’s slow, sleepwalking path into the abyss. It is bracing to hear him describe prophetically in an interview on The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice with Thomas Leabhart in 1991, “the verbal fascism that this culture continuously but very subtly lays on us, lays on itself,” and how the Captain character of that drama “embodies fascism, the dark nature.” In 1991, when the American mainstream was celebrating the triumph of free-market capitalism, Abdoh was among those few artistic voices proclaiming, Cassandra-like, that this triumph contained the seeds of totalitarianism. Today, in our own belle époque, when critiques of neoliberalism and neofascism consume both the activist and liberal left alike, and when the complicity between market capital and tyranny has again reared a hideous face, Abdoh is our untimely contemporary.

His work was not only ahead of its time, but also thoroughly of its time. Much overlap exists between his productions and ACT UP’s die-in demonstrations, with their shocking, deathly histrionics. Both deployed theatricality in its most extreme manifestations, not for its own sake, but to address and make demands
to their audiences. When Abdoh’s actors accost the viewer and hold forth in his hallmark, convulsive direct address—often from the other side of a chain link or barbed wire fence, like prisoners to the aesthetic and spiritual trial that he has created for them, for us—the viewer cannot avoid becoming a participant endowed with collaborative or complicit potential. In this regard, theatre becomes the medium for a revolutionary purity of gesture executed in full view, a gesture as bold and precarious in the field of art as any demonstration or die-in could hope to be in the field of politics. Just as ACT UP deployed spectacular gestures to demand an official state response to the AIDS epidemic, Abdoh confronts the spectator as a witness. His plays never prescribed a subsequent course of action, but fought instead to create new kinds of viewers who would be emboldened to think dangerously, to debate and puzzle out new meanings and actions on their own.

“These are the answer—remember these answers!” bellows the Captain (played by Alan Mandell) into the audience at Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice. The audience hasn’t yet heard of any questions, but the answers come in a torrent just the same. Abdoh was reportedly fascinated with American TV, and the ensuing litany of questions suggests an episode of Jeopardy gone berserk: “#1, Masda; #2, Citizen Kane; #3, Quantum mechanics; #4 forty-eight pounds. Remember!” Mandell’s ancient face, framed by a vaudevillian follow spot, is covered with lesions and pustules; his body ballooned by what is clearly a fat-suit; on his head, a garish red toupee. His voice rasps with sadistic glee, equal parts ham Shakespearean actor and used car salesman. This Satanic figure recurs frequently in Abdoh’s works: as the hideous father played by Tom Fitzpatrick in Bogeyman, and as the Jewish caricature Moishe Pipik played by Tony Torn in Tight Right White. In Abdoh’s theatre, the devil is a persistent, magnetic presence. And in the spectacle society Abdoh criticizes—which lives on today in our reality TV culture and the game show celebrity cult it spawns, The Apprentice and RuPaul’s Drag Race alike—the answers always come before the questions, preceding and predetermining them. The question of what can be believed spiritually, for example, is always already answered (and thus rendered irrelevant) by the gospels of profitability. With art critics too, this problem is especially pronounced: the difficulty Abdoh’s work presents its interpreters is how to approach it without subordinating it to a tidy pre-conceived schema.

Consider that for several decades there has been an ongoing debate among queer scholars (e.g. Leo Bersani, Lee Edelman, José Esteban Muñoz, and many others) over the relative merits of political optimism and pessimism for queer life, art, and politics. This debate has proved consequential both for the production and interpretation of modern queer performance. The question of whether or how to
hold out hope for the future is one that obviously concerned Abdoh, penetrating to the heart of his desire to embrace action in the name of “a more livable world.” And yet the works locate hope, the darkly radiant possibility of redemption, in the most unsettling of places: for example, in the figure of Jeffrey Dahmer (a.k.a. Jeffrey Snarling) in *Law of Remains*, who slaughters and cannibalizes a small army of black and brown queer boys on his way through an infernal landscape where Andy Warhol is making a film of his life, ultimately to arrive in the play’s final scene with Ronald Reagan (or a piece of him) in Heaven. The scenario suggests an affinity with Squat Theatre’s 1978 play *Andy Warhol’s Last Love*: Abdoh, like his Hungarian forebears, found in Warhol the opportunity to level a blistering critique of the American enslavement to pop culture, TV, media, and images. From the afterlife, Tom Pearl as Jeffrey writes to an old friend still among the living:

TOM: Dear Brigid, Here in heaven the government falls at least once a day and every night I am woken up by a vertigo of dead languages and murder of crows that shine like ice in the winter sun. Last night a hot rod, piloted by a debased and brutal angel screamed through a pregnant Ronald Reagan, leaving behind a wake of blood and afterbirth. Tonight I threw out a blast of condoms with a sad cheer. Tonight I will have a facelift. An incision will be placed in the hairline and the skin lifted forward and upward from the temporal bone. All my wrinkles will be removed. I will feel no pain. I will be young again, happy again, free again, Yours, Jeffrey.

Meanwhile a mummy is being passed from performer to performer while a funereal bell tolls seven times. Although this passage defies any interpretation that would characterize its depiction of redemption as merely ironic, an eeriness still clings to these final moments. One finds in them a sense of what Daniel Mufson has called “compromised redemption,” for, as he puts it, “if redemption comes, it will be less than redeeming.” Still, even though salvation may never arrive fully, Abdoh’s “characters” can never fully escape their longing for it. In classical theology, Heaven represents the cessation of all pain, yearning, and movement. Though Abdoh’s cruel surrealism depicts it as cut through by hot rods streaking blood and afterbirth, Dahmer’s hope to “be young again, happy again, free again” persists unalloyed. He is thereby both redeemed and hopeful, and full of continuing desires.

Against our prevailing queer theories of affect, then, I maintain that the presence or absence of hope in Abdoh’s work can hardly be figured as either resolutely pessimist or optimist, either uniformly despairing or hopeful with regards to his (and consequently our) political situation. He was demonstrably skeptical of
theoretical panaceas, and both his relentlessly apocalyptic work and his singular being in the world were too complex for such binaries. In place of clear answers, what appears in the work is a more ambiguous or paradoxical attitude, a vanishing or null point where hope and hopelessness seem to converge impossibly. It is in these quieter moments of the plays so difficult to hear in PSI’s exhibit, in the quasi-pastoral episodes—which Elinor Fuchs helpfully termed “heath scenes” after the precedent of King Lear—that an irresolvable tension between abject hopelessness and yearned-for salvation comes to the fore. In the final moments of The Hip-Hop Waltz of Eurydice, to offer another example, when the aged Alan Mandell reappears in a changed costume—looking frail and “wearing dingy longjohns” rather than his former fat-suit—the monologue he delivers in yet another enumerated list displays again just this convergence. Against both a painted backdrop depicting a happy suburban paradise regained, and also the actual, historical backdrop of the AIDS crisis, he shivers against the cold. Like Dahmer, he describes another awakening.

ALAN: 1) At night I am woken up, bathed in sweat, by a cough which strangles me. My room is too small. It is full of archangels. 2) I know I have loved too much. I have stuffed too many bodies, used up too many orange skies. I ought to be stamped out. 3) The thin white bodies, the softest of them, have stolen my warmth, they went away from me fat. Now I’m thin and freezing. Many blankets are piled on top of me. I’m suffocating. 4) I suspect they will want to fumigate me with incense. My room is flooded with holy water. They say I have got Holy Water Dropsy. And that’s fatal. 5) My sweethearts bring a bit of quicklime with them in hands in hands which I have kissed. The bill comes for the orange skies, the bodies, and the rest. I cannot pay it. 6) Better to die. I lean back. I close my eyes. The archangels applaud.

Oblivious to this death, a happy suburban couple mows its lawn and washes dishes, while in the background, wolves howl. During one of the Segal Center dialogues, the actor and frequent Abdoh collaborator Juliana Francis reflected on moments like these in Abdoh’s plays, suggesting they attest to Reza’s lifelong struggle with religious faith, his personal history as a migrant, and his eagerness to dramatize a longing for a space that could be safe. A faithless and immanent world, deprived of any transcendent guarantees, amounts ultimately to a world with no safe space, a world where all is war and every space pierced through with infinite danger. But the desire for safety and its assurances remains as an irreducible structure of feeling, and herein lies the seed of Abdoh’s radical immanent hope, which achieves its power only amid the depths of terror, persecution, and despair.
This null point in Abdoh’s plays recalls what Walter Benjamin admired in Kafka’s work as the hope of the hopeless: “plenty of hope, an infinite amount of hope” in this world of ours, Kafka had reportedly told Max Brod, “but not for us.” The emaciated Captain shuddering in his filthy long-johns is an image like the ones encountered in Kafka’s cosmos, as is the archangelic chorus. It is little surprise to learn that Abdoh was reading Benjamin intensively during the last years of his life, particularly during the time when he was co-writing Quotations with his brother Salar. This hope manifests itself not only in terms of the plays’ enigmatic content, but also in their form. Formally syncretic rather than synthetic, they bring together aspects of the baroque mourning play (Trauerspiel) with traditional Iranian mourning drama (Ta’ziyeh), Egyptian and Sufi mysticism, Symbolist and Expressionist techniques, Afro-Brazilian capoeira, classical Indian Kathakali, Latin-American telenovela acting, L.A.’s drag and S&M subcultures, American popular entertainment and postmodern theatre, hip hop, Bach, Connie Francis, and more. There is a Gnostic element to this syncretism, one with long roots in Abdoh’s Persian heritage. By constellating these various forms together, the plays show formal evidence of a will to rescue and preserve the vanishing detritus of past worlds, cultures, aspirations, histories of resistance. By rescue and preserve one might also say, to redeem, even if only in compromised terms.

Such anxious, hopeless gestures of redemption are not comparable to, say, the bloody messianism of the 1979 Iranian Revolution, an event that scarred Abdoh’s life. Rather, they imply an almost infinitesimally weak messianic power, nonetheless unavoidable for all its weakness. Such power is never fully extricable from the power of myth itself, but then Abdoh always understood, better than any other theatre artist since, the force of the mythic. (“I believe in the Dionysian forces,” he told Patlis during their interview, and his plays give no reason to doubt this statement.) In his work, the author and director, the performer, the spectator, and now the museumgoer, are all entrusted with this weak but urgent potential, which makes immediate demands upon any who would recognize it. When Abdoh spoke of his desire “to reach divinity through the act of performance,” this desire was both thus markedly spiritual and unshakably political, a desire to activate within the performance community a dispersed, mythic power that could aspire, however impossibly, to save society from its inexorable perdition.

“The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule,” Benjamin wrote at the end of his own short life, cut down too soon by the rise of fascism in his own time. “We must attain to a conception of history that is in keeping with this insight. Then we shall clearly realize that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism.” In 2018, that
struggle only continues. From the grim confines of Casa Padre, the New York Times has announced that “Hundreds of migrant families will be released wearing ankle monitors.” For all the dolorous, mournful hues in which he painted, Abdoh knew that lamenting the state of the world was never enough; rather, although lamentation amounts to a permanent condition in his work, it also leads obviously to rage at injustice, forming the precondition of action both artistic and political. Once again, “it is not enough to think of a world that is more livable . . . you have to act on it,” even though such action will always be haunted by catastrophe.

More than any other theatre artist in recent memory, Abdoh embodied precisely the sort of resolutely hopeful hopelessness Benjamin saw in Kafka. His work stands as a testament to a quixotic and utopian attitude that would defy our crushing, real-life, modern dystopias. A different conception of history—not as progress, but as ruination—is still sorely needed, as is the recognition that modern humanity has never yet progressed fully beyond barbarism to enlightenment, and Abdoh’s savage stage made this recognition fully visible. The “tradition of the oppressed” still needs protection if it is to offer counsel for the struggles to come. PS1’s exhibit, for all its shortcomings, serves as an eloquent reminder that Abdoh’s life and work were chapters in this tradition of the oppressed past, his dramas an injunction for their audience to realize its emergent power deep within. The American theatre needs his legacy, and more than that, his example, now more than ever before.

JOSEPH CERMATORI is a contributing editor at PAJ and assistant professor of English at Skidmore College. He is currently at work on a book on baroque dialectics in the modernist theatre from 1875 to 1945.