

FIRST PERFORMANCE

Philip Venables and Ted Huffman, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions*, Queen Elizabeth Hall, Southbank Centre, London, 25–28 January 2024.

When Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta wrote and illustrated *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* in 1977, nobody would publish it. Mitchell and Asta instead founded Calamus Press (named after the flowering psychoactive grass) and self-published their queer fable-cum-manifesto. Like a chapbook, it proceeded to be disseminated informally via photocopy (or, later, PDF) and became a cult classic. And, like a chapbook, it is slim, provocative and beautiful; Asta's illustrations resemble woodcuts, curling around Mitchell's text in Aubrey Beardsley-inspired filigree.

It is no accident, I think, that the early modern period's chapbook predecessors of *The Faggots and Their Friends* were such an important vector for the dissemination of folk song. The grass-roots tenor of its language of flowers, revolution and communal living aside, *The Faggots and Their Friends* is a songful text. The dancing limbs, hips, bricks, saws, rituals, parties, food, hair and orifices that populate its phrases and margins are loud, replete with invitations to song and dance. There is a sense in which Philip Venables and Ted Huffman's carnivalesque staging, then, feels less like watching an adaptation and more like being invited inside the book.

Unlike Venables and Huffman's previous collaborations, *The Faggots and Their Friends* is not an opera. Premiered at Manchester International Festival in June 2023, its London run attracted a different audience from that seen at their previous Southbank performance (*Denis & Katya*, 2020). Whether by invoking radical queer politics, foregrounding cabaret aesthetics or speaking to the pre-existing fan culture attached to Mitchell and Asta's book, *The Faggots and Their Friends* reached an audience akin to those found in London's drag, poetry and activist scenes.

Huffman drew the bulk of the show's text from Mitchell and Asta's book, from soprano Mariamielle Lamagat's haunting opening soliloquy ('it's been a long time... and we are still not free') to the decaying empire in which this series of vignettes, games and provocations is set ('Ramrod', ruled by 'Warren-And-His-Fuckpole'). Straight men are simply referred to

as 'the men', while 'the faggots' enjoy the company of 'strong women' (feminists), 'women who love women' (lesbians) and 'fairies' (the Radical Faeries). As Ryan Gilbey suggests, the 'potential tweeness' of this language is 'tempered' by this gleeful abundance of profanity.¹ Venables and Huffman's cast quote ecological aphorisms, but they also grind to techno beats and chant a relentless list of public places where 'the faggots love to fuck and suck'.

As Flora Willson writes, the set (designed by Rosie Elnile) reflects this queer hinge between the rough and the gorgeous, managing 'to be both grittily DIY and sensuously extravagant... with wooden chairs and musical instruments strewn around its edges, like a village hall before a rehearsal'.² At one point, the entire company play open strings on violins. At another, they march with tin whistles in mismatching keys and plastic buckets for drums. An upright piano, from which Yshani Perinpanayagam directs the ensemble with infectious energy, is wheeled around. In the spirit of communal musicking, it comes into its own as Kit Green gets the audience to join them in song. With wry playfulness and poise (and calling the surtitles 'middle-class karaoke'), they lead a Foucauldian anthem: 'in Ramrod the only way to tell the sane from the insane is by who has the keys'. The decision to ask the audience to jingle their own sets of keys as they sing creates a jarringly effective carceral soundscape; beautiful, camp and deadly serious.

This knife edge of playful political literalism also cuts through the 'competition' number, a game in which the performers race frantically around the piano, playing chromatic scales in relay and panting about the misery of patriarchal, capitalistic competition ('each tries to be first or richest or strongest or most potent. Each

¹ Ryan Gilbey, "'We Sing the Word Faggot Lovingly, Hundreds of Times': Inside Manchester's Queerest Show', *Guardian*, 26 June 2023, www.theguardian.com/music/2023/jun/26/faggots-friends-revolution-manchester-queerest (accessed 1 March 2024).

² Flora Willson, 'The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions Review – Unforgettable Celebration of Queer Activism', *Guardian*, 29 June 2023, www.theguardian.com/music/2023/jun/29/the-faggots-and-their-friends-between-revolutions-review-manchester (accessed 1 March 2024).

compares himself to the others and each is always inadequate'). In a 'clapping-game', the cast stamp out a three-against-six rhythm, chanting about men's inability under capitalism to 'talk about how they feel'. Dancer Yandass' performance is captivating during episodes like this, tirelessly carving rhythmic, frustrated shapes across this human percussion line.

The relentless motion of Asta's illustrations is as tangible in Venables' dances as it is in his ceremonies and laments. In the book, the baroque-ness of line-drawn filigree permeates Mitchell's text, too: 'the faggots cultivate the most obscure and outrageous parts of the past', he writes, 'these are the parts the faggots love the best'.³ As if summoned by the ghost of opera queens past, countertenor Collin Shay parades across the stage as 'Warren-And-His-Fuckpole', resplendent in a raggedly flamboyant cloak designed by Theo Clinkard. They beautifully execute seventeenth-century melismata: a coronation recitative that quickly devolves into a gleefully silly choral anthem. Meriel Price's arresting saxophone playing drives energetic passages of Vivaldi pastiche. Some of the most moving performances of the evening came from historical instrumentalists: Conor Gricmanis on Baroque violin, Jacob Garside on viola da gamba, Kerry Burse on theorbo and Joy Smith on early harp, all ornamenting lullabies and laments with sensitivity and grace in these oases of introspection.

The critical theorist Elizabeth Freeman has written of a queer tendency to be 'willing to be bathed in the fading light of whatever has been declared useless... longing for form that turns us backward to prior moments' and 'forward to embarrassing utopias'.⁴ We in turn 'mine the present', she writes, 'for signs of undetonated energy from past revolutions'.⁵ From so many angles, Freeman's formulation of the queerness of doing history encapsulates Venables and Huffman's project. Mitchell and Asta's book is of a past revolutionary moment; it predates the AIDS crisis. And yet they too were enacting this 'embarrassing' and retrograde excavation of useless ways of life in the 1970s. Nevertheless, they achieved an unnerving level of prescience, both about the dangers of assimilationism and about more defined and traumatic events, like the Pulse nightclub shooting in 2016.

Venables and Huffman do not shy away from critiquing assimilation any more than they shy away from describing violence: 'the men asked the faggots to join their armies', Huffman writes, 'so they learned to kill like the men'.

The palinode to the piano's 'competition' number comes in the form of an epilogue, an antidote for 'what the men have done'. Gathering in a circle, 'the faggots enact the ritual of the brutalization of the public arts', where they whip one another with a leather belt until they bleed. Venables' cell-based scoring for the ritual is tender and disturbing; a tritone-rich amplified flute trio describes a strange homophony, underpinned by soft tubular bells and a very quiet sine-wave drone. Mezzo-soprano Deepa Johnny delivers the terms of the ritual with tender gravity, but it continues for much, much longer after she has stopped singing. Unnerving shades of F major emerge during the long fade to black. It is a subtle and moving intervention into the musical hermeneutics of BDSM.

In the book, Mitchell's whipping ritual is as much about art as it is about kink. 'The public arts,' he writes, 'have been turned into games of chase and grab and hoard and expand and protect'.⁶ By ending their staging of *The Faggots and Their Friends* as they do, Huffman and Venables manifestly take this edict seriously. A triumph of ensemble performance, this remarkable piece of music-theatre engages deeply with the communal politics of its source text by wearing collaboration on its sleeve. No single performer outshone the others; each instead inhabited the very mutual creativity that the ethos of the text demands. Beyond the scope of this review but no less worthy of mention are Eric Lamb's haunting alto flute solos during the 'women's wisdom' section, Sally Swanson's charismatic accordion accompaniment to the 'papers ballet' and energetic performances from baritones Danny Shelvey and Themba Mvula. Venables' semi-open scoring is clearly tailored to the company for this first run but, again queerly in the spirit of its source text, is fundamentally flexible and very accessible. I would like to see it done by students and amateurs. It exudes the potential for interesting, exciting and radically different future performances.

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³ Larry Mitchell and Ned Asta, *The Faggots and Their Friends Between Revolutions* (New York: Calamus Books, 2019), p. 13.

⁴ Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. xiii.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. xvi.

⁶ Mitchell and Asta, *The Faggots and Their Friends*, p. 14.