



Linda McLean: The Ordinary and The Luminous

by Jayne Benjulan

One year ago, I read five plays by Linda Mclean. What astonished me most was not that no American theater person I knew except one, Taylor Mac, had ever heard of her, but that she is, without formal theater training, a playwright whose body of work has astonishing clarity and linguistic sparseness. Relationships unfold in gaps and silences. Meaning is not so much expressed in language as we tend to think of it—in words—but in language as signifier that brackets meaning.

Another marker of Linda's work is its revelation of the unheroic. In *Camera Lucida*, Roland Barthes distinguishes between the artistic focus conventionally found in the photographer's frame, essentially what attracts the viewer to the photograph, and the detail outside the photographer's frame. For example, if you look closely at Walker Evans' photograph of a young girl holding her baby in front of a shack, away in the corner is a young boy nearly hidden behind a half wall of wood. The poet Heather McHugh points out that the figure of this girl is a ready-made photograph, its meaning obvious: she is too young to be a mother. But the figure of the boy is the detail that breaks through the photograph. It is the detail of the boy that breaks your heart. Linda's plays are about people in the corner we might miss seeing, like that boy. *Any Given Day* is the story we might miss seeing, and seeing it is what makes unconventional

art.

Linda grew up in Glasgow and trained as a teacher. In 1994, while she was teaching, she took a continuing education class and wrote her first play. The response from her classmates and teachers was so positive, she sent it to the Traverse in Glasgow and several theaters in London. Among the readers of her early plays was the playwright Mark Ravenhill, who became a supporter. Ravenhill went on to work as literary director of a new company called Paines Plough in London and later, as an advisor at the National Theatre and Producer at the Royal Shakespeare Company. He is, like Linda, a radical experimentalist.

Linda is known in the UK as a playwright who continues to play with form; she is not interested in repeating herself. “I’d rather eat my own spleen,” she says, “than write the play I wrote before.” Each play is an examination of a way of seeing the world. About plot, Linda says, “I’ve given myself up to the way my brain thinks so that it’s almost synaptic.” It is as if the play is the unmediated product of her central nervous system, or at least, that is her goal. She finds linear form restrictive, and the more she experiments with form, the more formless the scripts become. Her plays, like much contemporary fiction and poetry, “attempt to reproduce the mental process, the artist’s journey. I cannot predict form—maybe theme, but not form.” To make that journey she risks, like so many adventurous playwrights before her, the loyalty of audiences who want to see what they’ve seen and loved before; and she risks the question, “yeah, but is it a play?” The two parts that constitute *Any Given Day* comment on each other, offering perspectives through which each part and the experience of its characters may be understood. Precisely because the two are connected, the structure of the play offers meaning.

Any Given Day, like Linda’s other plays, is physically and emotionally demanding for the actors; however, except in those places where the physical demands are specified, the script of *Any Given Day* includes almost no stage directions and no literal suggestions about physical movement. Sadie has almost no lines that extend beyond five or six words. Jackie and Dave speak in short phrases and partial sentences that mirror the rhythm of their mental process. On the page, the lines are short; they’re broken more like poetry than prose. Rather than dictate punctuation to the actor, there are breaks between lines to show how thoughts are connected—or not. The script offers tremendous freedom for the actor.

DAVE

Why don’t you leave that?
The cleaner gets paid to do it

JACKIE

What did he say exactly?
My son

DAVE

He said, I'd like to leave a message for Jackie please

JACKIE

. . .
Jackie?
Like that? Just Jackie?
Just Jackie?

The excerpt is classic Linda McLean: no indications of stage business, no directives for the actors about feeling or expression while they deliver the lines, unconventional line breaks and spare punctuation. Two people in a room: the lines are the container, the boundaries, for everything else that is going on between them.

In this work, ordinary people negotiate the terrain between the self, which is known, and the other person's self, which is not known. Everything is pared away but the small and the unmomentous. The heroic aspects of life—and of art—are shuttled out of the frame. What, the playwright seems to ask, is outside the frame? How is that connected to what's inside the frame? *Any Given Day* puts before us what is just beyond our vision, a world that is present but invisible, a world that leaves traces. Its two-part structure is an artifice in the way photography or lineated poetry is artifice. Art can unveil the connection between what we see and what we don't see, says Heather McHugh, "between the terrain we walk across each day and screen and the terrain that's really there . . . it takes imagination not to conjure up what isn't there, but to see what is."

The play Linda is writing now, *Sex and God*, is a commission from Magnetic North that will travel to the Traverse Theatre in Glasgow. Although not finished writing the script, she has already heard much of it in her head. She has flattened time and events and removed chronology. In 18 years, from the time she wrote her first play in a continuing education course to her latest commission, she has not stopped experimenting with form. "I have never been more confident as an artist than I am now. You can strip me of good reviews. You can strip me of commissions. I will now go to my grave knowing that I am a playwright and an artist.

This essay was originally published in the playbill for Magic Theatre, April 2012.

Sources:

Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida*. Trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1981.

Heather McHugh, "The Mind's Eye: Sight and Insight." Lecture in Asheville, N.C., Warren Wilson MFA Program for Writers, January, 2012.