

Anthony Torn, left, and Okwui Okpokwasili in *Democracy in America*.

JUSTIN BERNHOUT

Annie Dorsen puts 'Democracy' on the market—and the public buys in

BY NICOLE ESTVANIK

The first word of the performance is “contrary.”

That’s it. Just a man striding center stage to state: “Contrary.” This is quickly followed by a woman reciting from a Staples coupon, acerbic comments about Judd Apatow and Rudy Giuliani, manic crawling, Korean pop music and an obnoxiously loud fart noise.

“Oh, great,” you might be thinking. “Another experimental-theatre mash-up that forgot to take its Ritalin!” But “experimental” is an uncommonly literal description of Annie Dorsen’s *Democracy in America*. The antics on stage are the output of a micro-model designed to test theories about the United States posed by the French social philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville.

“Each bit of this piece was selected by someone—someone who had his own reasons for choosing what he chose. I have purposely resisted the temptation to draw thematic parallels,” Dorsen writes in her director’s note. The program lists more than 100 individuals who, over four months, supplied content for the 45-minute performance, which was seen this past spring at New York City’s P.S. 122 under the auspices of the Foundry Theatre. (Clips are still running, via streaming video, at www.buydemocracy.com.) These co-writers paid for the privilege, anywhere from \$5 to \$300.

That’s democracy, as many a self-identified realist would argue that democracy truly happens in the U.S.—enfranchisement via the almighty dollar. If you didn’t see what

you wanted on stage at *Democracy in America*, well, you got what you paid for.

SO HOW DID DORSEN AND COMPANY MAKE THE leap from French philosophy to simulating a sex act with a plastic dinosaur (to cite one of the show’s more egregious stage directions)? The director, widely known for her work on the musical *Passing Strange* at Berkeley Repertory Theatre in California and the Public Theater in New York, has been contemplating the project since the 2004 presidential election, when she cracked open her college copy of Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*, thinking, “I need a little help understanding where I live.”

Tocqueville toured the United States when it was only five decades old. He filled two volumes with analysis of U.S. politics and society. The adolescent nation showed exhilarating promise, but Tocqueville had lingering concerns: for one, that a culture with a multiplicity of ideas and actions, guided by self-interest, might lack a center. He worried, according to Dorsen, that “without hierarchy, without a stable way of determining which ideas have value and which do not...we would find ourselves drowning in opinions and options.” In other words, Tocqueville feared mediocrity.

For a while Dorsen chewed over these ideas with some friends, transcribing the conversations. Tocqueville was only a starting point, although most of the thinkers Dorsen cites



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Annie Dorsen

as inspiration—Jean-Luc Godard, Gilles Deleuze, Guy Debord—are Frenchmen as well. “I’m like the John Kerry of directors!” she jokes over lunch in the West Village, just steps from her apartment. It is March, early in the rehearsal process for *Democracy’s* premiere, and she has just shepherded *Passing Strange* to its Broadway opening. She’s drinking a Coke to combat exhaustion, but her wry sense of humor is very much awake and aimed at this latest endeavor. She recalls spending a residency at McCarter Theatre Center in New Jersey snipping and mathematically rearranging the transcripts: “I sat in a little room, total *Beautiful Mind*, you know, surrounded by my charts and sheets of random numbers that I had pulled off the Internet,” she laughs. “If we had more money we would have continued with that, but it took three weeks to rehearse 15 minutes of it.”

If we had more money—the artist’s refrain. “All I’m doing in this piece, really, is taking the idea of the marketplace of ideas, making it literal,” Dorsen says. “You could make the argument—you’d be exaggerating—but you could make the argument that because we have no public funding for the arts in this country, we’re already chasing the popular all the time.”

After a run-in with a Swedish group whose art consists of paying to stamp its logo on other people’s creations, Dorsen decided to take the idea to its extreme and make fundraising the substance and focus of the art. The Foundry is no stranger to unconventional projects; its *Open House* earlier this year was staged in private apartments in all five boroughs. But when it signed on to produce the show, financial support wasn’t even a factor—Dorsen aimed to generate

enough income from the online store to cover the entire budget. (Though she made it more than halfway to that goal, both the Foundry and P.S. 122 did end up chipping in.) All text, actions and effects would be included, regardless of merit or decorum, provided they were safe, legal and paid in full. The artists would link everything together with minimal new material. Everything was up for sale: pre-show music, program credits, even the Interpretation of the Piece (which, had anyone ponied up the \$2,500 asking price, could have made this article much shorter).

Dorsen narrowed down her cast to Philippa Kaye, Okwui Okpokwasili and Anthony Torn. Kaye heads an eponymous dance company, and both Okpokwasili and Torn have acted for Richard Foreman, among other avant-garde auteurs. It was a trio with enough downtown cred to pull off whatever high-wire acts (or freak shows) might be asked

of them, and they trusted their ringleader. Okpokwasili was classmates with Dorsen at Yale, and Kaye, who calls the director a “powerful thinker,” met her in grade school on the Upper West Side. Torn worked with Dorsen on an early workshop of *Passing Strange*, and she recently volunteered to be an assistant director on a film he created. “That’s the kind of person Annie is—she’ll jump into a situation,” Torn says.

Dorsen assembled the rest of her team: assistant director Stephen Brackett, dramaturg Katherine Profeta, production supervisor Erin Koster, and designers Bart Fasbender, Kate Howard and Sarah Sidman. Together this group created something in between a play and an installation. Dorsen’s terms for it include “collage,” “conceptual theatre,” “geopolitical chance operation” and “group-effort four-dimensional crossword puzzle.” Tocqueville’s *Democracy* asked what whole

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could result from America's disparate parts; Dorsen's *Democracy* challenges the very idea of a contained whole. The show comes across like a controlled dose of a substance that might ooze out endlessly, if the public could be convinced to keep making purchases. (And just imagine the untapped marketing possibilities: What if consoles were installed in grocery store checkout lines? Lighting cues could become an impulse item!)

Acting within such a format requires precision. "We talked about approaching it like a diagram," Torn explains. The transitions are all about getting the artists from task A to B to C while creating a rhythm that will carry the audience along with them. "Does this line really count if I don't pay for it?" (Thomas M., \$10) and "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn" (Harriette D., \$10) gives way to a "dance about the impending, cataclysmic, worldwide recession" (Jennie C., \$50), which dissolves in a sarcastic tribute to weddings (Luiz L., \$8). A round of Russian roulette with a tiny gun (Davis F., \$40) provides the framework for several melodramatic utterances. A lengthy poem about an ex-lover (John C., \$75), voiced earnestly by a blonde



Philippa Kaye performs a fan dance, while Miranda Torn, on screen, recites a poem of lost love.

little girl on a video screen, subsides into a murmuring soundtrack behind the action.

However artistically arranged, the script is a set of transactions with third parties—arguably absolving the artists of responsibility for the content, and therefore inviting the audience into a receptive state. Contractually, everything deserves its place.

EARLY IN HER CAREER, DORSEN

read an essay by Ibsen that compared the stage to a petri dish. Her reaction was to scoff: Theatre is not, cannot be, science. But with this project she did create an unabashedly *social* experiment, not knowing whether participants would try to stump the artists, advertise their own endeavors, promote their own viewpoints or regurgitate clichés.

The answer is "all of the above," though the nature of the purchases had a way of shifting on stage. The content of *Democracy* is less political than its concept, but only until it comes in contact with personal bias. (For every patron who took the closing line "Buy NASCAR in America!" at face value, there were likely 10 who assumed it was a scathing indictment of popular culture.) And one of the most puerile directives yielded intriguing results: At every show Torn was to lure a spectator up front with a shot of tequila, then convince him or her to do a striptease. Blame the above-mentioned receptiveness (could this be some sort of experimental-theatre hypnosis?) or just the tequila, but Torn reports an 80-percent success rate. Watching a portly older man progress from embarrassed protest to coyly mooning his fellow audience members, it's hard to know whether the purchaser of this moment was a jokester or a wily student of human nature.

More interesting than the content itself, therefore, is a question posed by Dorsen during that West Village lunch: "Why on earth would you spend money on this nonsense?" What kind of individual would fork over \$40 for the assurance that the number 23 would flash at the 23rd minute of the performance? Who assigned concrete value to Kaye wearing

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(unseen) a purple G-string, and pondering (unheard) “one of the big emotional swellings in *War and Peace*”?

The creators wanted to keep this line of questioning active in the audience’s minds. They hit upon a way to do it during the last week of rehearsal, after polling the buyers. Throughout the play, a loop of text runs across an LED screen mounted above the boxy stage, offering oddball glimpses of intent:

I worked for Nat Geo for 18 years and find maps a thing of beauty.... This dead dog/pudding image has been following a long time, and I thought better to pay someone else to do it than actually perform it myself.... I think everyone needs a moment in their week to reconnect with someone close, be they real or imaginary.... My initial idea was just to have it as a birthday gift to my ex(?) current(?) future(?) girlfriend.... I wondered how it would be funny if many of my Brazilian friends started buying chunks of dialogues in Portuguese.... I have to confess that I chose it because it seemed flip and ironic.

The running text reveals a range of backgrounds and motives. Obviously, the participants are united by disposable income and access to technology, but that was expected: “We don’t have an entire cross-section of the economy contributing to what goes on TV, either!” Dorsen points out. At a live auction launching the website last November, most of the bidders were supportive colleagues, but Torn reports that people unconnected to the theatre proved most eager to chip in, more susceptible, perhaps, to the vanity-press novelty of it all. All the better—the title isn’t *Artist Colony in America*. Still, the intermittently lowbrow results might confirm Tocqueville’s worst fears, or at least give pause to any self-respecting actor.

“Are we celebrating the banality of culture, or giving into it?” Torn asks rhetorically. “We kept discussing whether it was appropriate for the audience to see the piece as entertainment. But if we allowed ourselves to have fun in the process of struggling to put the experiment together, and if the audience shares in that struggle, they should share in that joy. I felt the spirit in which we made the piece was expanding into the audience.”

In the face of potential embarrassment, Kaye’s strategy was to focus on timing and clarity: “Annie’s direction was that all this content has been put on top of us, so we’re just paper dolls who are acting it out. We’re

The script is a set of transactions with third parties—arguably absolving the artists of responsibility for the content. Contractually, everything deserves its place.

wearing it, but we’re not commenting.” Okpokwasili, to whom it fell to seduce that toy brontosaurus, observes that “in a way, someone’s always paying money for me to do something. You find justification for everything you’re doing. You have distance—that’s what helps you navigate the humiliations, or enjoy it.” Dorsen’s project highlights awkward truths not only about the commissioning of

art but about the nature of the actor’s pact, whether the orders are coming from Sam Shepard or just some impish member of the paying public.

The flip-side is to appreciate in a new way the actor’s ability to function as a medium, channeling a multitude of voices. It’s a metaphor Dorsen posed to her cast early in the process. “Living in a city, you have a sense all the time of people talking to you who don’t have selves,” she muses. “Advertisements, sounds you hear from apartments, bits of radio. If you listen to it, you feel a bit like you’re in a kind of crazy media box where anonymous people are communicating to you all the time. I thought maybe that’s it—maybe we’re like little antennae just picking up a few of those signals that are floating around in the air.”



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