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Holstein's hair: The Politics of Decadence in The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein's *Splat!*

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Decadence is a polymorphous concept most often denoting decline and ruination, or pleasure, artifice, and excess. It is commonly associated with profligacy, and dredged up in times of crisis. Decadence has garnered considerable attention across the arts and humanities, particularly the late-nineteenth-century 'decadent movement' in Europe associated with the likes of J. K. Huysmans and Aubrey Beardsley; however, both the movement and the concept have gained little traction in theatre and performance studies. In the first part of this chapter, I speculate as to why. In the last part, I consider the relevance of decadence to the politics of radical theatre today, narrowing attention to a particularly illuminating focus: the appearance of hair in Lauren Barri Holstein's *Splat!* (SPILL Festival, Barbican Centre April 2013). I will be investigating Holstein's hair through the lens of decadence as it was imagined in the nineteenth century; however, I will also be dwelling on her radicalisation of decadent aesthetics and politics as a committed feminist. My intention is not to identify the nuances of this radicalism, so much as to provoke debate about decadence as a theme of potential relevance to contemporary theatre and politics.

Existing scholarship does not really grapple with the contributions of theatre makers to the decadent movement beyond references to a small handful of writers, including Oscar Wilde, Rachilde, and Gabriele D'Annunzio, where textual analysis of plays is generally the focus. But theatre makers *did* contribute to this movement, not least thanks to Rachilde, who was intimately linked to it as a successful author, and whose reputation supported (male) innovators of nineteenth-century theatre such as Paul Fort and Alfred Jarry (Lively 1998, p.4, pp.11-13). While some scholars strictly distinguish symbolism from the decadent movement (Pierrot 1981: 5), others flag the importance of concurrence in a nascent avant-garde (Deak 1993, p.2; Sherry pp.8-9) that included Fort's 'symbolist' Théâtre d'Art, which I propose is ripe to be reconsidered as a contributor to the decadent movement. Decay, ruination, social atomisation, introspection, and intense sensuality, while by no means fully encapsulating or unique to the 'broad set of resonances and associations' that decadent aesthetics has accumulated (Constable, Potolsky, and Denisoff 1999, p.1), nonetheless illuminate important aspects of its character, and I can think of few better examples than Maurice Maeterlinck's *L'Intruse* and *Les Aveugles*, or Rachilde's *Madame La Mort*, all of which were produced by Théatre d'Art in 1891. These works typify the decadent movement's preoccupation with socio-cultural collapse, psychophysical inversion and recalibration of the senses.

Hence, this chapter's provocation: If the possibility of a decadent theatre is accepted, why have scholars of theatre and performance been reluctant to deal with decadence? Most protagonists of decadent literature and drama, such as Des Esseintes in Huysmans's *A Rebours* (2003), or Paul Dartigny in Rachilde's *Madame La Mort*, are outsiders who revel in acts deemed deviant by a society that fails to accommodate them. They are often aristocratic rather than bourgeois, but they are also radicals who resist conformity. They upturn gender binaries or reform sexualities, distrust that which is deemed 'natural', and embrace fabrication, or desire escape from the quotidian, material world. In this, they share many of the ideals celebrated in live art (which also, and conversely, valorised 'authenticity' beyond representation) – but with an important difference: their retirement from society arguably marks retirement from politics. Moreover, they and their writers, mostly white wealthy men, were often misogynists labouring under the influence of other white men, such as Arthur

Schopenhauer, Friedrich Nietzsche and Charles Baudelaire, who idolised, eroticised, or castigated women as siren or victim (Pierrot 1981, pp.138-139). Even Rachilde, the most famous and influential female author associated with decadent fiction, identified as antifeminist, even if this may have been to secure her 'position in the decadent milieu' (Lively 1998, p.45). There are several reasons, then, why performance theorists might be uneasy about the prospect of a decadent theatre. Then why bother revisiting the concept of decadence *now*? What does decadence have to offer to contemporary theatre and politics?

I contend that decadent tropes such as ruination, artifice, and excess are today being innovated by theatre makers in ways that abandon or undermine decadence's associations with regressiveness and profligacy. I draw inspiration from the prevalence of such tropes in the decadent movement as a means of identifying aesthetic tendencies in contemporary theatre and performance that are by no means novel to the 21st century, but that find new footing within it, and that refigure more explicitly than their 19th century forebears the socio-economic and cultural grounds that might otherwise enable a more limited kind of elitist radicalism. One example is Lauren Barri Holstein, and it is to her hair that I now turn. Whilst 'decadence' is not a term that Holstein would use to describe her work, I find it a useful lens to help understand its messy explorations of ruination and artifice. Moreover, it is her binding of excess, artifice, and decay within a radical project targeting various kinds of normativity that piques my interest, steering me toward decadence as a multifaceted concept ripe for reconsideration in a discipline that has otherwise pushed decadence, in *this* sense, to its margins.

In *Splat!*, Holstein – labouring as her persona 'The Famous' – marshals several stereotypes adopted by her and her fellow performers. For instance, with a gigantic book of fairy tales nestled between her legs, she narrates the story of Little Bitch – a dutiful daughter who nurses her father each night, only to realise her own violent sexual awakening in a Bacchic orgy after learning of his violent sexual encounters with witches. Later, Holstein emerges through a paper target at the back of the stage on roller skates wearing an over-sized head of Bambi from the eponymous Disney film (1942), singing an out of tune rendition of *A Whole New World* (1992), and urinating on a pile of vomit, the paper target, and on a fellow performer's knee. She sings sentimental pop ballads, births a Bambi figurine from a 1989 McDonald's Happy Meal, and orders other performers to perform demeaning duties. In Holstein's words: 'From disgruntled housewife, to hypersexual whore/witch/popstar, to domesticated animal … these various roles of traumatic female-ness are carefully chosen, but (seemingly) haphazardly tried on and thrown off again, like cheap and ill-fitting clothes in the dressing rooms of Primark' (Holstein 2014, p.100).

The performance opens with a spotlight picking out a blonde wig from the darkness, draped over a watermelon, and suspended mid-air. The wig stands as a surrogate for the performer's body, and as an iconic vessel for the cultural coding of 'woman' as a spectacular, and vulnerable, object. Hair also takes on a prominent role throughout the performance: it is cut from her head with scissors; drifts down from the rafters; is nestled in bunches around Holstein's exhausted body; and is smothered with blood-like tomato ketchup before she's hoisted into the air feet first, dangling like a loose paint brush – an esoteric nod, perhaps, to Yves Klein's *Anthropometries* (1960), Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973-1976), and Janine Antoni's *Loving Care* (1993).

Hair has long been thought to capture the 'essence' or soul of men and women in multiple religions (Lowe 2016) and superstitions (Miller 2008), but as Robert Goldwater remarks,

'[t]here is no more striking or more common feature in the art of the end of nineteenth century than the representation of women's hair'; it contains something of woman's 'ideal essence, a symbol of that spirit at once pure and dangerous, of which she is both substance and symbol' (1979, p.60; see also Albert 2016, pp.242-46). While Goldwater is concerned here with symbolism, art nouveau and the Pre-Raphaelites, and not explicitly with the decadent movement, hair accrued a broad symbolic potency in *fin de siècle* art and literature. Think of Baudelaire, who grew drunk on the memories sleeping in twisted locks (2010, p.23), or Beardsley's iconic illustrations for Wilde's *Salomé*. Rachilde's hair was also legendary, reputedly worn short (at the time considered subversive), and cut and sold to a Russian prince as a fetish (Hawthorne 2001, pp 142-144). In *Splat!*, hair symbolises woman's 'ideal essence' along the lines Goldwater articulates, 'at once pure and dangerous', innocent and lustful, only here it is *exposed* as fetish. Interestingly, Holstein's next major work, *Notorious* (2017), returned again to hair as a key motif. *Notorious* was set against the backdrop of a giant curtain of grey hair, which found itself extended in long grey wigs worn by its three witch-like protagonists. Here, though, the 'essence' of woman reified in hair was neither innocent, nor lustful, but morbid, highlighting the gendering of particular forms of the supernatural, the violence of gender normativity, and the latent necrophilia of desire that dwells on an apparently lifeless object.

Splat! draws several connections between artifice and womanhood that are typified in the wig; however, the performance's relationship to the decadent movement is one of *appropriation*, subverting important sources of the decadent imagination – notably Baudelaire, Schopenhauer and, later, Nietzsche. For Baudelaire, the 'harmony' of woman is found 'not only in her bearing and the way in which she moves and walks, but also in the muslins, the gauzes, the vast, iridescent clouds of stuff in which she envelops herself, and which are as it were the attributes and the pedestal of her divinity' (1995, p.30); 'she has to astonish and charm us; as an idol, she is obliged to adorn herself in order to be adored' (1995, p.33). For Schopenhauer, dissimulation is a fundamental characteristic of womanhood (2004, p.83), with female beauty emerging as a theatrical 'stage effect' lasting just long enough to secure a man 'to support her honourably' (ibid., p.81). And for Nietzsche, 'nothing is more foreign, more repugnant, or more hostile to woman than truth – her great art is falsehood, her chief concern is appearance and beauty' (1997, p.24). For all three, whether keyed as adoration or derision, the 'essence' of woman is artifice.

Holstein's hair – itself 'an object, not an organ or a living thing' (Lowe 2016, p.18), though fetishised as lively and vibrant in magazines and shampoo adverts – sits in the midst of these perspectives. It stages them in all their ridiculousness. The deliberate bloodying of hair embraces artifice and repugnance in order to stage how truth is enacted, coded, and valued. The astonishment her hair produces as idol, as The Famous, is premised not on the statuesque, but the grotesque, staging 'post-feminism's vaunted "girl power" as gloriously messy, physically draining and ultimately deeply unsatisfying", to borrow from feminist theatre scholar Kim Solga (2013, p.67). Her chief concern is appearance and beauty, a theatrical effect, but she also seizes control over the means of producing appearance. The association of womanhood and artifice, as a still predominant feature of air-brushed pop culture, is exaggerated to the point of excess in ways that undermine the reification of womanhood. The audience is left to contend with an unassimilable surplus that says as much about the political potential of decadence in the 21st century as it does about the politics of identity. In appropriating the aesthetics of decadence, and positioning her body at the heart of a messy aesthetic conditioned by ruination and mess, Holstein refuses to accept the possibility of a coherent identity predicated on the multiple and incongruous commodities

and models of womanhood that are produced *for* women. Instead, she makes herself in the midst of incongruity, and displays that making, rife with failure as much as radical appropriation, as an act of both defiance and affirmation.

The decadence addressed in this chapter does not celebrate lavish expenditure on commodities enabled by the consolidation of wealth into the hands of a powerful few (in fact, expenditure is foregrounded as a problem toward the end of *Splat!* when Holstein reads aloud a list of the production's labour and material costs). Decadence might just as well be turned *against* processes of economic, social and cultural production that service normativity and inequality, appropriating and reimagining its look and feel in ways that draw attention to and reformulate the excesses afforded by relative privilege. For that one does not need to be profligate: one need only be radical, which is as much the preserve of theatre makers as any other activist.

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