

Le 10 janvier 2017

Review: Shedding Skins in Motus's Genre-Blurring 'MDLSX' at La MaMa

Silvia Calderoni must be made of mercury, or some improbably liquid element that has yet to be discovered. Surely no body of mortal flesh could undergo the quicksilver transformations achieved by this remarkable performer in "MDLSX," a perceptions-scrambling work from the Italian revolutionary theater troupe [Motus](#).

It's not that Ms. Calderoni impersonates different people, as is often the case in one-person shows. She remains, you might say, her singular self, though singular is perhaps the wrong word for someone who truly contains multitudes.

As she slithers, writhes and dances through the 80 visually ravishing minutes of the melting memoir of a show that opened on Sunday night at [La MaMa Downstairs](#), Ms. Calderoni makes it impossible for you to pin her down with the automatic adjectives we bring to our appraisal of strangers. Is she beautiful, ugly or plain? Young or old? Passive or aggressive? Seductive or willfully repellent?

And, most important to the dialogue this production hopes to set off in your mind, is Silvia Calderoni male or female? That the answers to these questions are both all and none of the above is very much the point of "MDLSX," which has been conceived and directed by Daniela Nicolò and Enrico Casagrande, who founded Motus together in 1991.

This iconoclastic company has developed an international reputation for blurring boundaries of form and content in theater. Earlier works such as ["Alexis. A Greek Tragedy"](#) (inspired by Sophocles' "Antigone") and ["Nella Tempesta"](#) (a riff on Shakespeare's "The Tempest") threw classical texts into the crucible of the politically combustible 21st century to see what new textures old standards might assume.

Devices as ancient as theater itself were combined with newfangled technology, and centuries-

spanning language seemed to be run through a blender. Ms. Calderoni memorably appeared in both works. She was a fiery (and inflammatory) Antigone in "Alexis," and in "Nella Tempesta," she was perfectly cast as the shape-shifting sprite Ariel.

Her presence in "Tempesta" caused the friend who saw it with me to ask afterward, in wonder, "But what is she?" No doubt many other theatergoers posed the same query, at least to themselves, and "MDLSX" might be regarded as Motus's and Ms. Calderoni's response.



Silvia Calderoni in "MDLSX." Credit Michelle V. Agins/The New York Times

This performer serves as onstage D.J., camera operator and quick-change costumer as well as the star of a work that mixes autobiography, academic discourse, a jukebox of cool rock numbers and descriptions of life as a hermaphrodite from Jeffrey Eugenides's celebrated novel ["Middlesex"](#) (2002). Home movies figure in the mise-en-scène, as does a recording of an interview with the gender theorist [Paul B. Preciado](#).

A circular screen hangs from the right rear of the stage, on which are projected images of flowers blooming via time-lapse photography, dissolving landscapes and, most important, Ms. Calderoni.

We see her both as a clean-scrubbed, boyish adolescent (being asked by her unseen mother about what she wants out of life) and as the platinum-maned punk god she is today, as she trains a tiny camera on herself.

A monologue — spoken in Italian with English supertitles — finds Ms. Calderoni making lyrical statements about the inadequacy of the vocabulary we have to work with. “I’d like to have a word for ‘the happiness’ that attends disaster,” she says, or for “the hatred of mirrors that begins with middle age.” Or, she adds, “for a girl who’s always been taken for a boy.”

These statements become more than essayistic whenever Ms. Calderoni moves, often to music from the likes of the Smiths, Vampire Weekend, R.E.M. and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs. Her body is as slender as a grass snake’s, and she sheds clothes — leggings, T-shirts, underpants — as if she were molting. Even stark naked, with a camera taking medical inventory of her body, she seems to belong to no gender.

At one point, as she’s describing her late-arriving puberty, she attaches large clusters of fake hair to her armpits and crotch, which she then uses as pompoms to become a prancing, menacing cheerleader. She wallows on the floor in layers of light that turn her skin blue, a cross between a Smurf and a Playboy centerfold. (Alessio Spirli is the magician responsible for the lighting and the videos.)

There comes a moment in the show when you realize that the first-person narrative Ms. Calderoni is delivering is no longer her own. Readers of Mr. Eugenides’s “Middlesex” will recognize the story now being told in fragments as that of Cal, that novel’s double-gendered protagonist.

Other theatergoers are likely to feel totally at sea. This switch in perspective feels of a piece with Motus’s aim of pulling the comfortable rug out from beneath its audience. And Ms. Calderoni gives vivid life to some of Mr. Eugenides’s most startling set pieces, including a climactic sequence in a freak show.

But I wonder if such literary appropriation was necessary. The production delivers its message most effectively without words.

When Ms. Calderoni lies on the floor, raises her pelvis and lets her attenuated body be bisected by a laser of green light, symbol and substance fuse in a way that gives new resonance to gender fluidity, and the androgynous form before us defies division.

Ben Brantley