

FLIES IN THE OINTMENT

BY ELLE FLANDERS

CHARACTERS:

YVONNE — An American dancer, choreographer, and filmmaker. Active in numerous New York vanguard art circles from the 1960s to the present, her work is experimental, challenging and POLITICAL.

JOHN — An iconic Canadian gay filmmaker with a penchant for bad boy antics, musicals, opera, Brechtian theatre and POLITICS.

DANIEL — A younger video and performance artist living in Toronto.

SARA — A Canadian video and performance artist who is currently the president of a major Canadian art school.

ANDY — A longtime Canadian video and performance artist, a writer and a waiter.

"YVONNE" — Someone playing Yvonne Rainer

DIRECTOR — A middle-aged woman

FADE IN

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

JOHN and YVONNE are seated across from one another on a stage. The audience claps as they have just performed a dance with tissue boxes on their feet.

JOHN

Are they the right size?

YVONNE swings her legs and nods while staring down at her newly acquired "shoes".

YVONNE

I'm still a little flummoxed by the introduction. I had no knowledge of this...

She pauses, a clip comes on the screen behind her.

YVONNE (CONT'D)

In 1996, *MURDER and murder*, my last feature film..

And so begins what I like to refer to as *The John and Yvonne Show*, which took place at the International Experimental Media Congress in Toronto in April, 2010.

In Yvonne Rainer's autobiography, *Feelings Are Facts: A Life*, she counters Audre Lord's most oft-quoted statement "You can't dismantle the master's house using the master's tools" with: "You can if you expose the tools." This has been Rainer's life's work; from her deconstructed choreography to her dialectical films, she takes things apart, strips away the artifice of emotion and replaces it with another meaning. And while sometimes humour helps convey her deeply political messages, it seems unintentional. Indeed, if you spend any time with Rainer, she comes across as shy, even a bit awkward.

When I was a student at the Whitney Program in the 1990s, Rainer was one of our artists in residence and I was lucky enough to have spent some time listening to her, Laura Mulvey and Mary Kelly. Can one dream of a better feminist education? I often imagined the three of them in a film together that played over and over again in my head. It was something of a Lizzie Borden Born in Flames without bicycles and whistles but with all the anarchic radicalism. At the end of the film the academy recognizes Rainer in a deeply altered world of cinema.

FADE IN:

Film screen with the Sphinx flickering.

CUT TO:

INT. EVENING LARGE SYMPHONY HALL

WIDE SHOT of a large audience clapping at the end of the sequence, mostly women with a smattering of men.

CLOSE-UP of Mary Kelly smiling as Laura Mulvey walks to a stage. She is being handed an Oscar™ by Yvonne Rainer, who performs a small gesture known to everyone from Trio A, her infamous dance piece. Audience claps.

CUT TO:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

We see a screen with a clip from *MURDER and murder*. Two middle-aged dykes in a boxing ring are arguing about their relationship. YVONNE is on screen narrating about breast cancer.

The ever-youthful JOHN, enfant terrible with the innocent boyish grin, begins his conversation with YVONNE, his feet still clad in tissue boxes.

JOHN

Perhaps we should explain the Kleenex boxes first?

YVONNE

I made a dance in 1971 after returning from India... I followed the Kathakali around, the classical Indian dance music dramas that retold the myths of Ramayana, and I came back in culture shock. I put together a dance for my immediate group of dancers who were studying with me. There were very formal formations that emerged. At one point there is this Chilean artist I was working with (who appeared in one of my films) reciting a text and shuffling forward in this line, getting stew, oh, and they were in Kleenex boxes.

CUT TO:

EXT. MIDDAY CITY STREETS

WIDE SHOT from knee down of riot police marching.

CUT TO:

CLOSE-UP of crotches in riot gear.

So what's the relationship here? It's unclear. What could these two possibly get up to? Frankly, a great deal, perhaps even a riot, if the audience would allow it. John Greyson works hard to provoke and prod us.

CUT TO:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

CLOSE-UP of Yvonne's head turned up towards the screen while her film plays.

YVONNE returns to the clip from *MURDER and murder*.

YVONNE

(To the audience in the auditorium)

MURDER and murder is about two middle-aged women, one who has been a longtime dyke, and the other is newly persuaded. One is an academic of some kind, and the older one, Doris, is kind of a mediocre freelance performance artist. They're having difficulty in their relationship.

Behind YVONNE two women are boxing in a ring on screen. They are arguing. Camera pans down to the floor of the ring covered with facts about women and breast cancer.

YVONNE

(On screen-direct camera address)

Ok, I've been putting this off, I've been living an oblivious cat's life, only in my case, I've had five chances instead of nine. (Takes her boxing robe off and bares her chest to the camera/audience. She has a long scar and no breast).

When I first became the director of Inside Out, the Lesbian and Gay Film Festival of Toronto, we were ecstatic to hear that there was a lesbian feature that had just been finished. It was Rainer's. Richard Fung was the programmer and while we were expanding into the mainstream (multiplexes, sponsorship, etc.), we wanted to keep true to our experimental and political roots. *MURDER and murder* presented a challenge to the LGBT film festivals that had started to shift to more mainstream work that embraced (gobbled?) Hollywood's nod to the queer community. The trend towards normalization was leading the politic of the day and Rainer with *MURDER and murder* was a fly in the "gaystreaming" ointment. Middle-aged dykes, breast cancer, and a resistance to narrative cinema kept the radical in queer, but simultaneously drew the lines in a community emerging from the AIDS crisis between the desire for normal, and the commitment to an ongoing engagement with radical politics.

CONTINUOUS:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

A clacking sound off to the right. We don't immediately see where this is coming from; we simply hear the noise as YVONNE attempts to discuss *A Film About A Woman Who* (her third feature, 1974). It seems to throw her; the audience shifts uncomfortably in their seats.

The audience begins to chafe. They wonder if YVONNE knows what JOHN is up to. Did he prepare her? It seems unfair. She appears confused.

There is tension in the room as filmmaker and video artist DANIEL clatters away, for no apparent reason, on a typewriter. Both the sounds and the intertitles that appear on an overhead screen behind JOHN and YVONNE are a distraction.

CLOSE-UP of hands on an old typewriter.

Daniel is typing on a typewriter, the text of which shows-up on screen behind JOHN and YVONNE.

DANIEL

I used to work for a subtitling agency...

YVONNE turns to look at the screen behind her head and tries to remember what she was saying.

Greyson dropped a clue to these seemingly bizarre occurrences earlier when he asked Rainer about her use of Radical Juxtaposition. She tells us that Susan Sontag coined the phrase. It refers to the collision of opposites that creates what Barthes would describe as a third meaning—something not immediately understood, something not handed to us but something that emerges. This is evident as we review Rainer's body of work, from her dance pieces to her films that are something of a polemic, an argument she needs to work out both for herself and with her audience. Rainer clearly ascribes to Schoenberg's concept of art as something that should "shake one up; that art should not be a relaxed affair but rather something that takes you out of your comfort zone."

CONTINUOUS:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

MEDIUM SHOT of Yvonne. She is stumbling over her words as she is trying to explain the previous clip.

YVONNE

I made a mistake; I cropped the text too much in the frame. You should have been able to see that it was newsprint. The text over my face were all quotes from Angela Davis' trial.

JOHN

I wanted to ask you where your influences were from for all the techniques we just saw in *A Film About A Woman Who?* The sound that cuts out, the repetition of the speech, the drifting camera, the text, all the layering that you do, especially with typewriter text.

YVONNE

From silent films, intertitles, foreign films with subtitles. When I first started experimenting with text it was with raunchy subject matter. For a whole audience to read sexual material at the same time, I was going for the, well, not quite queasy effect, but I knew it would have a different impact.

CLOSE-UP of one woman whispering in the audience to another. There is a restlessness.

The audience begins to get annoyed as the typing continues. Something about the Ten Commandments and subtitling pour out of DANIEL'S typewriter, then sensing the audience's irritation, he types on screen:

DANIEL
(Typing)
You can ask me to stop

AUDIENCE
(In unison)
Stop!

DANIEL
(Handwritten)
Or to continue...

AUDIENCE
(In unison)
Stop! No, continue!
(More no's then yes's)

AUDIENCE
(To YVONNE)
We want to hear your voice! We want to hear you!

YVONNE
(To Audience)
Maybe he should just write and not type?

AUDIENCE
Yeah!

JOHN waits for audience response to quiet-down.

JOHN
Have you ever used handwriting on a screen?

YVONNE
No

JOHN
Well, you've pretty much used every other kind
of typography available.

YVONNE

A lot of the text in *A Film About A Woman Who* was typed on a very old typewriter with some damaged keys. I think I had thrown it on the floor before.'

MEDIUM SHOT of text continuing to flow on the screen behind, handwritten notes, somewhat interactive, somewhat rambling, sort of distracting.

Personally, perhaps being a bit "terrible" myself, I am enjoying the show. This is the moment it becomes *The John and Yvonne Show* (despite Rainer's obvious lack of knowledge): two artists and filmmakers using interventions to engage their audiences; Greyson responding to Rainer's work by employing these techniques live. This is not an easy task at an experimental media congress in Toronto—Bravo! But why should this not be the place? On the surface of things what better place? But the discomfort of the audience is palpable. Perhaps however, the gauntlet that was thrown down was to move beyond the cliché of experimental. For Greyson an audience is a laboratory where elements interact to see what gets made, what erupts and similarly for Rainer as evidenced in her films and dance performances.

But as spontaneous as it all seems, the layers of research and meaning behind Greyson and Rainer's gestures are manifold, (and seeing them in action together is like watching a tennis match of political ideologies). This is evident when it later becomes clear that despite Rainer's invocation of a 1971 dance piece when Greyson asked "why Kleenex boxes," the tissue box *pas de deux* they performed had yet another layer of meaning that Greyson was recalling: It was an homage to Rainer's recent dance piece *RoS Indexical*, performed at Documenta XII in 2007, and commissioned for Performa 07 (The Second Biennial of Visual Art Performance in New York). *RoS* is short for *The Right of Spring*, Stravinsky's 1913 ballet that erupted in a riot. The fact that Rainer had mined her very early dance experiments only to return to the tissue box thirty years later in a new piece, tells us that despite the appearance of randomness in her work, there is in fact a teleological acuity. Greyson and Rainer are both never far from provocation usually in the form of agitprop, and I wondered as I conducted my treasure hunt for clues as to Greyson's references, if he was hoping for a similar *RoS* moment?

Some audience members seemed annoyed that Greyson was "taking up too much space." But more accurately it was as if we could have split the room in two: Those who were not having any of his antics, and those who chose to immerse themselves in the action unfolding before them: A meeting of minds between two great performers who have been at the political forefront of the art world for decades.

CONTINUOUS:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

YVONNE

(In response to a question from JOHN)
Who speaks is a basic question. What is spoken
and what is read. What do people do when they
are having conversations? In theatre...

A voice from stage left pierces the onstage conversation. SARA,
positioned in the audience but with microphone in hand, stands up
and begins to interrogate YVONNE.

SARA

YVONNE, YVONNE you say you want to juxtapose
things: Images, texts, discourses without
comparing them. Couldn't it be argued that any
juxtaposition and practice of montage forces
elements into a narrative order...

A voice from stage right interrupts. ANDY, positioned in the
audience but also with microphone in hand, argues with SARA and
reads from a script.

ANDY

Wait a minute, wait a minute! *Comparisons*,
sure, but are those deterministic? I am more in
agreement with Ruby Rich who argues they
function dialectically and self-reflexively.

(Andy goes on to quote Rich)

We have just finished watching a clip of *Journeys from Berlin, 1971* (1980) a film that juxtaposes
a conversation about the rise and fall of the Baader Meinhof Group (which takes place off-screen
with the voices of Amy Taubin and Vito Acconci along with the sound of meal preparation) with
Annette Michelson's monologue to an analyst about her discomfort with the subservience of a
store clerk. This dichotomous clash of image and sound, ideology, and action interrogates themes
of domestic terrorism, isolationism (political and personal), suicide and the encroaching power
of the state over the individual—none of which seems terribly distant from where we sit today.

When Greyson asks Rainer about her use of domestic sounds juxtaposed with political speeches
and radical texts, she tells us she was raised by Anarchists and it refers back to when the women

she was surrounded by were discussing political issues suffused with layers of having to deal with women's inequity in America. Like her films, she glides in conversation to 1976 when she had a DAAD fellowship in Berlin and the Baader Meinhof Group (aka the Red Army Faction, a Marxist-Leninist armed resistance organization) were active. She was conscious of the backlashes of the German government and shared an apartment with a woman who could not get a job as a result of her Marxist associations. Upon her return to the US in 1977, Rainer thought to combine the pre-revolutionary material, the writings of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman, with contemporary texts of insurrection in *Journeys from Berlin*. The lines between her life and her work become porous and we drift between screen, action, life and performance.

CONTINUOUS:

INT. DIMMED ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM

John is discussing a clip from *Journeys From Berlin* that the audience has just seen.

JOHN

The scene that gets remembered in this film the most perhaps is the Fassbinder scene, which is also a domestic scene. Fassbinder and his mother and lover playing themselves and the line between life and performance is as invisible as can be. Though scripted and calculated in character terms.

YVONNE

Brings us back to what do people do when they are speaking, like in *MURDER and murder*, they eat chicken soup and in *Journeys from Berlin*, they eat dinner.

The interruptions in Rainer's work come through much like she does: sometimes they appear accidental—something she bumped into or read that day, and at others, so calculated in their collision so as to make meaning erupt whether you are prepared for it or not.

Greyson's stunts take on a new meaning as well: Neither quotation nor buffoonery, they instead reveal a deep understanding of Rainer's work.

CUT TO:

INT. SCREEN

Rewinding, we go back to the beginning of the evening:
ON SCREEN Slides roll, each with a single word spelled out:

Why Rain? Why Run? Why Rainer Werner Fassbinder? Why Rein? Why Ruin
Singing in the Rain? Why Wane? Why Justin? This is how JOHN begins
his introduction to YVONNE's work, and to each question he proposes
several answers that bring to light her career and her commitment
to the avant-garde project.

CUT TO:

INT. LIT ART SCHOOL AUDITORIUM
ABOUT AN HOUR LATER

MEDIUM SHOT of John and Yvonne, slouched in their chairs. John is
bringing it to a close.

JOHN

As an avant-gardist, a contemporary media
practitioner, as a committed activist, where is
the relation with contemporary media practice?
Is there hope for activism and avant-garde and
activism once again, in the kitchen making
chicken soup?

YVONNE

There has to be. The avant-garde project is
still a viable project, a necessity. There are
real issues still out there: Abortion rights
have to be fought over and over again there is
no such thing as Post-Feminism. There are still
these struggles.

It struck me as I sat through *The John and Yvonne Show* that Rainer and Greyson challenge each
of us as beings, as political beings, to be experimental and to do experimental in order to bring
about cataclysmic change. Rainer's films are in essence manifestos not only about form and/or
the politics of form, but about politics. Period. In recent years the radicality of form has been
adopted without the politics. Institutional critique and the October moment (Michelson, Krauss,
Buchloh, etc.) while aesthetically imbricated, pointed back at something. And that something
was politics.

Greyson's tactics in his "conversation" with Rainer not only drew out the moments of collision that produce politics, but at every turn should be read as a deep homage to the artist by producing yet another political turn. What greater compliment could Rainer have received than to have her films and thought, her life's work, re-enacted for her audience to contend with? For those who remain unconvinced about what took place that evening at OCAD in 2010, that discomfort only belies Greyson and Rainer's belief that the function of art is to shake us out of complacency and comfort. Indeed, many were shaken.

CUT TO:

INT. MOVIE THEATRE

WIDE SHOT of a large audience watching a dance number in a movie theatre.

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL SCREENING ROOM

WIDE SHOT of several people watching a film.

CLOSE-UP of a woman watching the screen

DIRECTOR

(To no one in particular)

Can you run that section again please?

(Turns to her colleagues).

What do you think? Should we leave that cut?

CUT TO:

A SCREEN where YVONNE is choreographing a dance number. JOHN is directing. The ensemble is singing boisterously on a theatre stage.

CHORUS

(singing)

It's springtime for Hitler and Germany.
Deutschland is happy and gay!

JOHN

(V.O. off screen)

I fully realize that a person who stands for
what I stand for — an activist, a gay activist
— becomes the target or potential target...(voice
trails off with radio interference)

JOHN (CONT'D)

(on screen reading from a page)

Why are we here? Why are gay people here? And what's happening? What's happening to me is the antithesis of what you read about in the papers and what you hear about on the radio. You hear about and read about this movement to the right. That we must band together and fight back this movement to the right.

Screen behind JOHN's head shows footage of a Pride march in Toronto, a group walks by with signs that say: Queers Against Israeli Apartheid. JOHN is amongst them.

JOHN

(continues reading)

We also have another issue that we've started in some of the north counties and I hope in some of the south counties it continues. In San Francisco elections we're asking—at least we hope to ask—that the U.S. government put pressure on the closing of the South African consulate. That must happen. There is a major difference between an embassy in Washington which is a diplomatic bureau, and a consulate in major cities. A consulate is there for one reason only—to promote business, economic gains, tourism, investment. And every time you have business going to South Africa, you're promoting a regime that's offensive.

In the city of San Francisco, if everyone of 51 percent of that city were to go to South Africa, they would be treated as second-class citizens. That is an offense to the people of San Francisco and I hope all my colleagues up there will take every step we can to close down that consulate and hope that people in other parts of the state follow us in that lead. The battles must be started some place.

CUT TO:

EXT. PARK DAYTIME

A tent city with banners and hundreds of protesters milling about with signs that read: We are the 99%! Corporate Greed is Undemocratic! The Banks Stole our Dingy!

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT

A middle-aged woman with glasses is playing YVONNE Rainer.

"YVONNE"

(direct camera address)

Unlike Katharine Hepburn, I say there is no reason you can't have it all. In art you can have it all; you can have your cake and eat it too. But I'm against one idea, there's too much of that in art today, I'm always pushing for a clash of different ideas. I always ask, where is the fly in the ointment?

CUT TO:

INT. SMALL SCREENING ROOM

CLOSE-UP of the DIRECTOR watching the screen.

DIRECTOR

I'm good with that. Thanks.

THE END