

Boundary creatures

the acrobat, the astronaut, and even the porn star ... had been able to escape their own bodies and, for a few moments, flee their condition and enter something more hypnotic.

—Chloe Aridjis (2013)³¹

The logo for Double Edge Theatre has an archaeological backstory—the bacchanalian figure with the double-bladed axe, their original logo from the 1980s, has subsequently been streamlined, and, in recent years, has come to represent a winged woman.³² This is apposite given that one of the company’s signature performative practices is “flying,” including trapeze acts, aerial choreography, and intricate stilt-work, much of which is derived from ensemble members’ backgrounds in circus and puppet theatre.³³ Klein explains that she had “always wanted training to not only deal with the ground,” and, like the logo, such gravity-defiance has evolved over time through a commitment by particular members of the company to aerial training.³⁴ Klein’s directorial style has even been likened by one reviewer to that of a “ringmaster extraordinaire.”³⁵ Such Icarian ambitions make Carrington’s imaginary sites all the more appropriate given the number of airborne vehicles and winged creatures that inhabit her imaginative universe. Double Edge found this was particularly the case in their performance of the soaring figures that occur in her paintings *La chasse* (1942) and *Nine Nine Nine* (1948). Co-producer Cariel Klein astonished audiences in their rendition of the latter picture, their body twirling and undulating upside down, their spiral flight a conduit for the alternative realities on offer (Figure 32). Later, Travis Coe soared across the pond at night in a *deus ex machina* as if inhabiting the floating islands of Carrington’s wartime painting, *La chasse*. Again, it is interesting that flying should be the preserve of the women and non-gender binary members of the ensemble. Serenity Young, who has written a cultural history of flying women, explains how acts of flying rail against “patriarchal definitions of womanhood” as a metaphor

for actively breaking restraints and taking control of one's destiny.³⁶ Writing further on the paradoxical figure of the aerialist, Helen Stoddart points out the simultaneity of the illusion and the reality of their body politics, highlighting this figure as a synecdoche for the whole cultural phenomena of circus:

There is ... congruence between the presentation of the female aerialist's body and the image that the circus as a whole has presented itself ... the circus self-image is at heart a paradoxical one since it promotes an idea of itself in the popular imagination as embodying a lifestyle unfettered by conventionality or by social and legal restraint: a freedom which was echoed in performances which foregrounded the illusion of ease. Behind this image lie levels of physical discipline, bodily regulation and hardship which are unrivalled by any other western performance art.³⁷

For the Double Edge ensemble, such commitment to physical discipline and dedication to circus techniques and training all contribute to making the theatrical spectacle appear seamless and effortless. On one level, it is illusion, on another, it is a lived reality that suspends disbelief. This is what makes productions like *La Maga y el Maestro* and *Leonora's World* such successful practical inquiries into surrealist techniques in the early twenty-first century. The figure of the aerialist also has much to tell us about Carrington the artist, and her ability to enable us to imagine the impossible.

Donna J. Haraway's notion of the "boundary creature" offers a useful way of defining how the winged beings and raw material of Carrington's imagination have been adapted so authentically into Double Edge Theatre's sense of flight.³⁸ The creatures that Haraway has in mind are anomalous cyborgs, mermaids, and women, "wild cards" that inhabit "possible [feminist] worlds," marginal beings that Haraway repositions at the heart of her "blasphemy."³⁹ While Haraway's biotechnologies might seem out of sync with Carrington's organic universe and Double Edge's farmland, Haraway maintains that "the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion."⁴⁰ Her emphasis on the repositioning of myth, hybridity, and "possible bodies" are therefore allied: "The boundary is permeable between tool and myth, instrument and concept, historical systems of social relations and historical anatomies of possible bodies, including objects of knowledge. Indeed, myth and [biotechnological] tool mutually constitute each other."⁴¹ Such a statement may be closely aligned with Double Edge Theatre's Carrington cycle and might be pushed even further when it comes to Carrington's philosophical aftermath.

Elaborating on Haraway, Mary Russo and Frances S. Connelly further probe the compelling idea of the boundary creature as the very manifestation of the grotesque: "something that creates meaning by prying open a gap, pulling us into unfamiliar, contested terrain."⁴² Connelly does this by

re-reading the grotesque through the architectural grotto, arabesque, carnivalesque, and caricature: “[the grotesque] is earthy and material, a cave, an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds. It is a space where the monsters and marvels of our imagination are conceived ... fusing humor with horror, wit with transgression, repulsion with desire.”⁴³ This is true also for Russo who describes study of the grotesque as “claustrophobic,” and “position[s] ... the grotesque—as superficial and to the margins.”⁴⁴ Although Carrington’s work is not mentioned specifically in either study, both conclude that the grotesque is typically associated with “the attributes of the feminine.”⁴⁵ Such languages of the feminine grotesque are germane when it comes to appreciating Carrington’s underlying haunting of maximal theatrical spectacles and liminal trapeze work. Double Edge Theatre’s flying figures present the physical manifestation of such edgework, not only parading Carrington’s own boundary creatures but demonstrating Carrington *as* a boundary creature herself. Some of the most successful adaptations of Carrington are cognisant of this aspect of her legacy, the significance and political potency of prowling the fringes, as well as being acknowledged in the limelight.

In closing this chapter on flying beings, eco-farming, and theatrical adaptation, I would like to suggest that the grotesque boundary creature has become the very manifestation of Leonora Carrington for Double Edge Theatre and beyond, an embodiment of feminist intertextuality and mythological rewriting. Along this edge or line of inquiry, I find another Venn diagram linking many of the examples already touched on in this study, from the performative bodies of Tilda Swinton’s *The Maybe* (1995) and Samantha Sweeting and Lynn Lu’s *The Hearing Trumpet* (2011), to the trickster-like entity of Lucy Skaer’s *Harlequin is as Harlequin Does* (2012), and to the ecological introverts in novels by Chloe Aridjis and Heidi Sopinka. In evoking Carrington as an epistemological framework, Double Edge’s multifaceted production makes its audience reflect and seriously consider the possibilities of communal creative living, the benefits of existing in closer proximity to agriculture, and a proactive awareness of the native Nipmuc culture that have left their mark on this land. In total, Double Edge Theatre can be seen to interweave all aspects of adaptative gestures inherited from Carrington, from narrative costumes to esoteric conceptualism, from animal rights and intertextual dialogue to the importance of an eco-feminist creative solitude.

Notes

Double Edge Theatre’s response to the global pandemic is noteworthy, having to cancel their spring 2020 tour half-way through. Double Edge Theatre opened for

socially distanced tours, hosted Tai Chi classes, and presented their Summer Spectacle under the heading ‘6 Feet Apart, All Together’ (2020) for limited audience numbers around 12 key locations across their 105-acre farmland. This spectacle continued their reference to Carrington with a scene entitled, ‘Leonora’s Labyrinth of Tarot.’

- 1 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 2. Grateful thanks to Kim L. Pace for introducing me to this idea.
- 2 Stacy Klein cited in Richard Schechner, ‘Double Edge Theatre in its Ashfield Community: An Interview with Stacy Klein,’ *TDR/The Drama Review*, 64:4 (December 2020): 69. For more on Klein’s history with Rena Mirecka, see 50.
- 3 Josh Appignanesi cited in Jennifer Higbie, ‘How “Female Human Animal” Blends Documentary with Fiction,’ *Frieze* (2018): <https://frieze.com/article/how-female-human-animal-blends-documentary-fiction> (Accessed 24 October 2019).
- 4 Chris Rohmann, ‘Love Letter to a Nightmare,’ *Valley Advocate* (4 February 2020): <https://valleyadvocate.com/2020/02/04/love-letter-to-a-nightmare> (Accessed 14 April 2020).
- 5 Interview with Stacy Klein.
- 6 Janet Lyon, ‘Carrington’s Sensorium,’ *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, eds J. P. Eburne and C. McAra (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 164.
- 7 Frank Hentschker, ‘In Conversation with Stacy Klein and Stephanie Monseu,’ *Segal Talks* (8 May 2020): https://youtube/SOzefa8J_Bc (Accessed 12 May 2020).
- 8 Susan L. Aberth, ‘Programme Notes,’ *Leonora: La Maga y el Maestro* (2018), 6. More recently, Klein has continued to remind audiences that Aberth was there from the beginning of their research into Carrington, ‘Leonora Carrington and the Theatre: Susan L. Aberth and Stacy Klein In Conversation’ (7 March 2021): www.youtube.com/watch?v=gJUTP82shOY (Accessed 28 March 2021).
- 9 For more on Carrington’s theatrical interests, see Tara Plunkett, ‘Dissecting *The Holy Oily Body*: Remedios Varo, Leonora Carrington and *El Santo Cuerpo Grasoso*,’ *Leonora Carrington and the International Avant-Garde*, 74.
- 10 Andreas Lommels, *Masks: Their Meaning and Function* (London: Ferndale Editions, 1981), 7.
- 11 Natalya Lusty reads this mask in terms of class and “faceless wage labour,” *Surrealism, Feminism, Psychoanalysis* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 34.
- 12 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 107.
- 13 Stewart, *On Longing*, 20.
- 14 Bill Marx, ‘Best Stage Productions of 2019,’ *The Arts Fuse* (28 December 2019): <https://artsfuse.org/192651/theater-feature-best-stage-productions-of-2019> (Accessed 24 April 2020).
- 15 Jonathan P. Eburne, “‘All Artwork Is a Magical Act,’” *ASAP/J* (10 October 2019): <http://asapjournal.com/all-artwork-is-a-magical-act-an-interview-with-susan-aberth-and-stacy-klein-jennifer-johnson> (Accessed 16 April 2020).
- 16 Tilda Swinton performs the same detail in her fashion story with Tim Walker for *i-D Magazine* (2017).