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A Play That's Sure to Make You Sweat

Baraka's 'Dutchman' to Be Staged in a Bathhouse

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Kevyn States, left, and Tori Ernst at the Russian and Turkish Baths, the setting for "Dutchman."

THE Russian and Turkish Baths on 10th Street in the East Village is a place where people (including, legend has it, Frank Sinatra, Timothy Leary and John Belushi) have gone for escape for more than a century. But the baths could easily pass for a place you would want to escape from, under different circumstances. Inside, they are dark and dank and sweaty, packed with masses of hot, sagging flesh, a spa version of Dante's City of Dis, where the heretics are punished in burning stone coffins.

In a recent run-through of "Dutchman," the rooms were cooking.

"This is not a spa where someone leads you by the hand and puts cucumber slices on your eyes, let's say," said Dmitry Shapiro, a son of one of the owners.

The other day, a young man and woman sat inside one of the hottest dry-heat rooms — the thermometer near the ceiling hovered near 160 degrees — having a too-loud conversation that almost made people drooping inside the room look up. "What do you think you're doing?" the woman said angrily to the man.

"What?" the man asked.

“You think I want to pick you up, get you to take me somewhere and” have sex, the woman shot back.

The man seemed stunned and a little wounded. “Is that the way I look?” he said.

When these lines of dialogue, written by LeRoi Jones (later to become Amiri Baraka) were first spoken onstage in 1964, the way the man and the woman looked — he is black, she is white — had far different implications than it does today. But on Monday, when a dozen or more audience members crowd into the same room at the baths for a highly unconventional staging of “Dutchman,” Mr. Baraka’s incendiary allegory about race and assimilation, the play will undoubtedly be no easier to watch than it was almost five decades ago.



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In part this will be because, for the first time, the play will have the Stygian setting its temperament seems to demand. And

viewers — who will have to get a locker and shed their clothes and walk around in the same thin brownish-purple tunics that many bathgoers wear — will be crowded up against and sweating alongside the actors for about an hour, with precious little fourth-wall separation from the play’s mounting ferocity. (Hilton Als, in *The New Yorker*, once wrote that reading “Dutchman” is “like watching an expert butcher at his bloody chopping block.”)

The sold-out revival of the play — taking place as part of Performa 13, the latest iteration of the New York performance-art biennial — is the work of the visual artist Rashid Johnson, who has never staged a piece of traditional theater. But growing up in Chicago, Mr. Johnson, 36, would go with men in his family to the Division Street Russian and Turkish Baths in the Wicker Park neighborhood, a storied place he came to think of as readymade political theater, starring, on some days, the Rev. Jesse Jackson and other Chicago power brokers, sitting in their towels, talking shop.

“You never knew who would it would be — Hasidic guys next to Mexican businessmen, busboys and gangbangers in there who found out about it,” he said recently. “We’re talking about this really strangely diverse community.” Not long after he moved to New York in 2005, he found the 10th Street baths, and they became more than just a diversion. “It’s almost like a cult space for me,” he said. “It’s one of the only things in my life that I manage to do consistently almost every week.”

He added: “It’s a place where you can’t take your phone, and there are no recording devices. People are disrobed. People are exposed to a degree that they never are in public, and so it’s a place for really honest negotiations. I think of it as a very even playing field.”

He also began thinking of it as a place where he would love to see a play staged, though it was more a fantasy than a plan. But after he saw a 2007 revival of “Dutchman” at the Cherry Lane Theater in Greenwich Village — the theater where the play had its premiere, and won an Obie — he became more serious about the idea. And when RoseLee Goldberg, the founder of Performa, approached him about participating in the biennial, bringing the play and bathhouse together started to seem possible.

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The setting of the play itself is a subway car, in which the woman, a seductress named Lula, and the man, Clay, a budding young intellectual, meet seemingly by chance and have a conversation that veers quickly from tension and eroticism into the open wounds of civil-rights-era racial politics. Mr. Baraka's set descriptions depict a 1960s pre-air-conditioning subway — "in the flying underbelly of the city steaming hot" — but they could easily pass for the baths, an ambiguously public place where strangers also come to sit next to one another for a while for a common purpose.

In "Dutchman," Kevyn States and Tori Ernst will perform in the steamy rooms of the Russian and Turkish Baths in the East Village.

The new setting, Mr. Johnson said, seemed not only fitting but also

necessary for exploring his interest in the play, which some critics dismiss as a relic of its time and of Mr. Baraka's Black Nationalism. "People have this expectation that theater and art are inherently generous," Mr. Johnson said, "that they're there to cater to them rather than to produce problems. And I was interested in this because I want to see something that pushes people up against their limits. The heat is an enormous factor in that. The level of comfort and discomfort is very important to me."

He said this as he was standing, dressed only in black swim trunks and flip-flops, in the baths on an afternoon when it was open, full of humid customers, two of whom were his actors, Tori Ernst and Kevyn States. Mr. Johnson has rented the baths during off hours for rehearsals and will rent it for the evening performances, during which the sauna heat will probably be turned down a bit. But a few rehearsals were done during regular hours, and in the recent run-through with Mr. States and Ms. Ernst, the rooms were cooking. ("Sometimes it feels like your skin is really going to come off," said Alex Ernst, the play's assistant director and Tori Ernst's sister.)

The play's revival chimes with a theme of this year's Performa, a broad examination of the concept of citizenship, "looking at how performance has always been a way to ask questions about what it means to be a moral person in society, a member of a society," Ms. Goldberg said. The idea will be picked up in other Performa works that will take place around the city, well outside the confines of traditional theaters and galleries. The Polish artist Pawel Althamer will set up shop with his two sons in a Polish bar along the East River in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, trying to create a kind of makeshift immigrant collective. The Indian artist Subodh Gupta, dipping into a venerable tradition in contemporary art, will perform as cook and host at nine successive feasts on the Lower East Side.

Mr. Johnson said one of his goals in using the bathhouse was to create a performance that might live largely by word of mouth — because so few people would end up seeing it, and even those with tickets might not be able to endure the entire play. (As it progresses, the actors and the audience move from one hot room to a cool passageway and then, for the violent dénouement, into the Russian room, the hottest in the house.) He said he had in mind works like Vito Acconci's "Seedbed," in which Mr. Acconci lay concealed beneath a wooden ramp at the Sonnabend Gallery in SoHo in 1972, masturbating and mumbling through loudspeakers to people who walked in; and David Hammons's 1983 performance "Bliz-aard Ball Sale," in which the artist sold snowballs from a blanket on a lower Manhattan sidewalk, priced according to size.

"How many people actually saw those things and how many people have talked about them since?" Mr. Johnson asked. "I like that idea that something gets created partly in the telling."

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Almost as important, though, has been creating the piece over time inside the bathhouse. He bought the actors passes for 15 visits and urged them to go not just to begin rehearsing but also to absorb the culture of “the schvitz” — Yiddish for sweat — in a place that has made few concessions to time (except that the sign affixed for many years above the cold-water pool, saying, “No Pets,” seems to be gone now).

For the actors, the heat has been both a boon and a daily physical ordeal. “You’re breathing deep, and your heart’s pumping, and the sweat is rolling down you,” said Mr. States, cooling off the other day in the bathhouse’s fluorescent-lit cafe. “It helps you to feel it.” But he and Ms. Ernst have had to learn how to pace themselves, when to eat (well before rehearsals) and how to hydrate.

And even then, they never know. Mr. States had to leave the heat only recently when he thought he might collapse. “There’s no way to be in here and not participate,” Mr. Johnson said. “This place participates you. You’re involved, whether you like it or not.”