

The New York Times

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Joan of Arc Is on Display As Star of Stage and Screen

It is hard to say which figure is a more daunting artistic subject: Joan of Arc or Maria Falconetti, the great French actress who starred in Carl Dreyer's 1928 silent film masterpiece "The Passion of Joan of Arc."

THEATER REVIEW

CLAUDIA
LA ROCCO

So naturally Reid Farrington has tackled both in his directorial debut, "The Passion Project,"

now at Performance Space 122. Part film installation, part live performance, the half-hour show offers a sophisticated, at times wrenching, encounter with history: artistic, real and mythic. It also forces a more insidious encounter: the audience must deal with its role as witness.

The performer, Shelley Kay, mostly occupies a square area in the center of the theater. She is bounded by festooned ropes, projections and the standing viewers, who crowd around, jostling and jockeying much like Joan of Arc's persecutors in the film and those citizens who come to watch her burn. It is a strange thing to feel abashed when Ms. Kay's calm, somewhat abstracted gaze meets your own eager one.

But she largely ignores her aggressive watchers, preoccupied instead with the obsessive rearrangement of numerous parchment screens that variously catch and fragment every outtake of Dreyer's film, transforming it into moving sculpture. These screens are stretched on wooden frames that Ms. Kay manipulates, thrusting them before her in aggressive lunges or hanging them from the ropes by means of black, wickedly curving metal hooks. Torture comes to mind.

Yet what beauty there is in Mr. Farrington's work. Like Dreyer's film it is both luminous and cruel. And there is another layer, that of the contemporary artist trying to come to terms with the past without neutering it atop a pedestal. In addition to a discussion of the music that was originally connected to the three versions of the film (in one of those strange twists of art and life, it, too, was lost to fire), we hear Mr. Farrington and an archivist talk about how to approach these multiplicities.

Mr. Farrington spent seven years as a video artist for the Wooster Group, so it's no surprise that he should come to such graceful terms. There are moments of awkwardness, as when Ms. Kay overremotes, or when the spoken elements grow too self-conscious. But these are blips in an engrossing whole, the first, let's hope, of many such offerings by Mr. Farrington.

The Passion Project

Performance Space 122

Dance

Edited by Gia Kourlas
dance@timeoutny.com

Shots in the dark

Reid Farrington and Shelley Kay expand a Dreyer masterpiece to three dimensions.

By **Gia Kourlas**

It's not hard to be blown away by Maria Falconetti, the star of Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 silent film, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*. Director and video artist Reid Farrington, formerly of the Wooster Group, was so transfixed by her haunting performance that he decided to create a living, moving portrait of her in a projection environment. In *The Passion Project*, he entrusts this vision to actor-musician Shelley Kay, who not only bears an eerie resemblance to Falconetti, but responds to more than 100 cues per minute as she performs dozens of tasks, including the manipulation of parchment-covered screens with a single-minded devotion worthy of Joan herself. Over lunch in midtown, Farrington and Kay spoke about bringing a film to life.

Reid Farrington: I knew that I wanted a performer involved, but I didn't know why. People would ask, "What are you doing?" and I would say, "A video project with a live performer." They would ask, "Why?" and I would say, "I don't know." Finally, it became clear that Shelley would be moving and catching these images. I imagined her being edited into the film. Once it starts, it doesn't stop until the film ends.

Shelley Kay: It's so dreadful. The [projection] machine is cranking, and I feel it before I get on the stage, which is a ten-by-ten-foot cube. I enter the space and the audience is standing all around it—so I'm walking into the throngs like a boxer. I know what's going to go down once I cross the line into that cube. It just doesn't stop. I'm trying to retrieve the images and to put the film back together, all the while being inches away from close-up faces of extreme suffering. It gets to you.

Farrington: We're not telling viewers how to experience this. You can't. The thing that's exciting is that the audience connects to |Shelley as a performer, of seeing her having to move around the space frantically. They're seeing how hard it is to do this, so they open up their sympathy for her, and then there's the story of Joan's life and visions that's just kind of floating through the room. The audience can choose to be interested in that story, but there is a sympathy for a woman alone with an unbelievable task. And the faith that it's going to work.

Kay: I really have to believe that I can do this, because it's very daunting. Joan of Arc, if you watch that film, spends the whole time biting her nails, tears streaming down her face; her brow is all furrowed, and what makes her strong is that she considers every question, every moment, and she keeps going even after she

faints and falls down on the ground. Her vulnerability makes her strong. As a performer, I have nerves and a vulnerable human quality: Are my legs going to hold up? Are my arms going to be okay? It's just cue by cue and cut by cut—making decisions to get to the next point. It's kind of like Joan.

Farrington: We have structured moments, but I'm interested in pressing Shelley to do something new. We sculpt it that way.

Kay: I get pulled into the emotion, undoubtedly, but Reid keeps saying, "Work | from the outside in." We work from a very physical point of view. If I just walked into that space and decided to play it emotionally, I would be a weeping mess.

Farrington: You wouldn't remember all your cues. Early in the process, I could tell when Shelley would go to that emotional place, because she would forget where she was in the space and wouldn't remember what her next step was. I would tell her, "No, you can't do that—you've got to stay on the task." She went through lots of training.

Kay: Hitting tennis balls against the wall. Yoga.

Farrington: We came up with a workout schedule. It was trying to get her physically in shape to be able to maintain 30 minutes. I love to see her sweat.

Kay: Sweating is inevitable. I don't feel winded, but even my hair is drenched. I don't get that on the spinning machines! I'm really working it.

Farrington: And that's beautiful to watch! Seeing somebody actively doing something is great. Seeing somebody hide or pretend that they're not doing something? I can't ask Shelley to be Joan of Arc because then she'd have to pretend to be Joan of Arc. I don't want to watch that onstage.

Kay: When I click in it feels like a nightmare. I'm sorry! It does. But if I can connect with the emotion too, it also feels very beautiful, which is quite eerie. It's a very dark, black-and-white world with occasional glimpses of some color. When I close my eyes, I see a very deep violet. I only get a couple of moments to go there. But that's her color.

*The Passion Project is at P.S. 122
Thu 11–Sept 20.*

STILL LIVES
Kay and Falconetti appear side by side in *The Passion Project*.

Dance

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Tickets: 212.352.3101 www.ps122.org

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September 17, 2008

The Passion Project

Directed and created by Reid Farrington

P.S. 122

150 First Avenue, 212-352-3101

The dark hall echoes with the amplified noises of a rickety projector. Subtitles and scene fragments flicker on the floor in black and white. These sounds and shadowy shapes come from Carl Theodor Dreyer's 1928 silent-film masterpiece *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, whose master negative went up in flames—like Joan herself—not long after it was finished. (Dreyer cobbled together another version from outtakes in 1935, but that burned, too; maybe casting the young Antonin Artaud as a monk brought bad luck.) In homage, Reid Farrington has now created *The Passion Project*, a 35-minute installation performance, to celebrate and lament this classic's fiery past.

The audience stands and watches from all sides of a 10-foot-square playing area, where solo performer Shelley Kay performs a frantic ritualized dance among projections from the film's various versions. As celestial martyr music swells, the silent Kay holds up 10 small white screens to the movie beams, capturing fleeting glimpses of faces, frames, and fragments. *The Passion Project* might look like Wooster Group video pastiche, but it prefers earnest tribute to layered irony. It's ultimately a formalist exercise, technically accomplished but studious; this fascinating film's embers, however, still give off heat. **TOM SELLAR**

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CULTURIST

What you are doing this weekend

July 11, 2008 – 6:22 pm

1. Netflixing ["The Passion of Joan of Arc,"](#) Carl Th. Dreyer's 1928 masterpiece. That is, if you're not into watching it on YouTube:

The film has an eerie history. Its master negative was lost to fire the year of its release; Dreyer released a second film cut from outtakes, only to have that one be destroyed by another fire in 1935 (Joan, remember, was burned at the stake). Lots of versions have floated around since then, until, unbelievably, a print thought to be from the master negative was found in 1980 in a Norwegian mental institution (!), in a broom closet.

2. Checking out [this review](#) of the film on the [The Criterion Contraption](#) blog, dedicated to Matthew Dessem's fabulous effort to see every DVD in the Criterion Collection

3. Reading "Burned Again," Joan Acocella's thoughtful essay on various treatments of Joan of Arc; originally published in the New Yorker in 1999, it is collected in ["Twenty-Eight Artists and Two Saints,](#) which you should own anyway.

4. Getting tickets for ["The Passion Project,"](#) which is running this weekend and July 17-19 at the [3LD Art & Technology Center](#) in the Financial District. Part video installation, part performance, "The Passion Project" is the directorial debut of Reid Farrington (also its creator), who has been a video artist with [The Wooster Group](#) for the last seven years. He is the man behind the hypnotic video elements in the collective's 2007 production of "Hamlet."



Shelley Kay goes face-to-face with Maria Falconetti in "The Passion Project"

A friend and I went last week. It was magical, and sinister, and strange - one of the most satisfying theatrical experiences I've had in ages.

What made it so successful? Farrington is going up against some big, BIG historical heavyweights here - this iconic, apocryphal film, and the whole legend of Joan of Arc outside of that. We've talked about the idea of preserving art [here](#), and how that can bedevil people's best intentions. But Farrington has found a way of preserving while still going forward, a way of engaging with history and making this historical work contemporary by exploiting the very distance that exists between us and it - there is no official version being enshrined and set on a pedestal and protected by a trust. We get to see, instead, a contemporary artist/mind grappling with a mythic chimera. And we, as audience members, get to grapple right alongside. We get to be seduced by the grandeur of the original even as (literally, through some gorgeous video work) Farrington shatters it.



5. Brainstorming over how you can change the course of an endless war, piss off the priesthood in the process, get burned at the stake and martyred for your trouble, and later immortalized through art.

By Claudia La Rocco | Posted in [Uncategorized](#) |



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CULTURIST



Claudia La Rocco

Cul´tur`ist

- n.
- 1. A cultivator.
- 2. One who is an advocate of culture.

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September 17, 2008

The Passion Project



SEEING THE LIGHT Kay basks in cinematic brilliance.

★★★★★

P.S. 122 (see Off-Off Broadway). Created and directed by Reid Farrington. With Shelley Kay. 30mins. No intermission.

Theater lovers argue that live performance trumps film because the former is ephemeral. But history is full of celluloid treasures that have been misplaced or destroyed. Something mysterious gathers around a lost film, making Carl Theodor Dreyer's twice-immolated masterpiece, *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, the industry's bigfoot. After his 1928 negative burned, Dreyer assembled another from outtakes—then it burned too. Luckily, there's a happy ending involving a copy in a closet, but for the purposes of Reid Farrington's installation *The Passion Project*, it's best to imagine the film forever on the edge of destruction.

Farrington gives his show the full Wooster (he has designed video at

the Performing Garage). First he edits together the various versions, extending the silent star Renée Falconetti's every blink into stuttering facial arias. He traps his lead actor (Kay) in a small square, cluttered with vellum canvases and surrounded by four massive video projectors. Farrington then shoots his montage at and through her, while she dashes around capturing images on her handheld screens. The effect is of Joan surrounded by judges who manifest only when she wants them to—inquisitors as insubstantial as angels. This can be sublime. It can also, unfortunately, be irritating—Kay hasn't got the chill necessary for such self-abnegating work, and Farrington's soundtrack features his own self-congratulatory commentary. But these are quibbles. *The Passion Project* shouldn't be watched, it should be entered into. After all, it is an act of devotion.—Helen Shaw

PHOTOGRAPH: PAULA COURT