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MIDNIGHT AT THE PLASTER FOUNDATION: "It's Free to Come Here But You Have to Pay 50¢!"

Jack Smith, circa 1970, 17 mins. B&W.
 With Jack Smith and Abbe Stubenhaus
 Unknown videographer
 Restored through the generosity of VidiPix (New York)

THE SECRET OF RENTED ISLAND a/k/a Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon

Jack Smith, 1977/1997, 80 mins. Color.
 Adapted from *Ghosts* by Henrik Ibsen
 Cast: Jack Smith (Oswald)
 Slides by Raffe Azzouny, sequenced by Edward Leffingwell and Joseph Santarromana.
 Produced with the assistance of the Estate Project for Artists for AIDS

Few recordings exist of the live performances Jack Smith presented from the late 1960s into the mid 1980s. Indeed, far more people have seen Ron Vawter's interpretation of one such piece, the 1981 *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* that formed the basis for the second act of Vawter's 1991 production *Roy Cohen/Jack Smith*, than saw all of Smith's performances combined.¹

From the spring of 1970 until his eviction two years later, Smith staged midnight performances—pitched between a ritual and a rehearsal—at the Plaster Foundation of Atlantis, a duplex loft at 36 Greene Street. Half of the loft's middle ceiling had been removed. The remaining portion sheltered a collection of old chairs and sofas—eventually a rickety wooden grandstand—for the audience. At the center of the loft was the performance area, a fantastic accumulation of refuse and junk. This assemblage surrounded a simulated lagoon, made from an inflatable pool, with plastic tubing providing a small waterfall. Further back was an upright victrola, encased in a coffin, from which issued a steady selection of scratchy Latin, Hawaiian and exotic mood music, Hollywood scores, occasional pop songs or educational records. Behind this a few flats stood propped against each other to create a murky backstage area.

Like Kurt Schwitters' legendary merzbau, Smith's monumental assemblage was both specific to its location and continually growing. It incorporated all manner of material, much of which must have been found on the streets of the still-industrial neighborhood where the Plaster Foundation was located. Included were empty bottles and tin cans, old magazines and fallen pieces of plaster, a toilet, crutches, 'a number of commercial signs ("Free All Day," "U.S. Gypsum"), a large heart-shaped candy box and several dried-out Christmas trees, feathers and streamers, a rubber dinosaur, a teddy bear, various dolls and parts of mannequins. The assemblage was festooned with Christmas tinsel, glitter, and candles, and bathed by colored theater lights from above. Smith encouraged contemplation of his set's structure by spending a minimum of thirty to forty minutes of each performance making minor adjustments in its composition, or pretending to vacuum it while wrapped in a shawl.²

The Plaster Foundation was both Smith's home and his theater, and the spectator often had the feeling that what one saw enacted there was no more or less than Smith's daily existence, framed by an audience's presence. The spectacle began with one's arrival and ended several hours later when Smith disappeared into his loft's upper reaches. The play, which varied wildly from performance to performance, involved, in a general sense, listening to music, waiting for the performers to finish dressing up, and watching the slow burial and exhumation of artifacts from the set. It was performed under a number of titles including *Withdrawal From Orchid Lagoon* and *Capitalism of Jingola*. The cast, sometimes referred to as the Reptilian Theatrical Company, also

varied and Smith occasionally performed alone. On those nights when there were actors, much of the presentation revolved around their preparations. They often appeared to be unrehearsed and confused, reading from the script whose pages were passed around the stage. Typically, Smith gave them cues and direction while they were performing.

Although some Plaster Foundation productions had an unmistakable aura of menace, others were light and relaxed, characterized by the ironic juxtapositions and Smith's deadpan clowning. The evocative music, the lateness of the hour, the slowness of the action, the joints that occasionally circulated through the small (and serious) audience, combined to create an elastic framework that successfully encompassed all mishaps and delays—in fact, anything that happened—into the framework of Smith's art.³

Although the Plaster Foundation served as the studio for *No President* and was documented in numerous Smith shooting sessions (both 35mm slide as well as super-8), the videotape called for convenience *Midnight at the Plaster Foundation* and most likely shot in early 1970, is the only known record of a performance piece. To judge from the derelict Christmas trees and other seasonal detritus glimpsed in the loft, it may be *Gas Stations of the Cross Religious Spectacular*.) Not surprisingly, given the contaminating effect of the alien video technology, the performance is unusually disastrous. Even before the image has stabilized, Smith can be heard ordering the crew to "restore" some toppled debris and yelling at his assistant Abbe Stubenhaus to yell out his greeting to the few patrons who have climbed the four fire-trap flights to his loft, "It's free to come here—but you have to pay fifty cents."⁴

After a while, Smith takes center stage and ponderously informs the audience that "if anyone needs to go to the bathroom, please ask for the Lucky Nun of Noa Noa and give her a dime and she will show you where the bathroom is." Reading from a script, Smith repeats the injunction that "you must have your dimes ready." Soon, this solo performance—interspersed with instructions to the unseen crew—breaks down. The artist waves and walks off camera, complaining and muttering, a proud failure.

Made some seven years later, *The Secret of Rented Island* documents Smith's legendary, gloriously eccentric restaging of Ibsen's *Ghosts*. The play was one in which the artist had a longstanding interest although, as he told Gaby Rodgers, "it is timely doing *Ghosts*. There are new strains of VD which will not respond to penicillin, you know."⁵

Perhaps the most radically pragmatic staging Ibsen has ever received, *The Secret of Rented Island* (a/k/a *Orchid Rot of Rented Lagoon*) was performed at the Collation Center, a loft on Park Place near City Hall. Like all Smith productions, it was in a state of constant flux. At the performance I attended, Regina was played by a large pink plush hippo suspended in a pulley-operated basket, Engstrand and Pastor Manders by a pair of toy monkeys, each placed on a little wagon, while Mrs. Alving had a human interpreter (NYU drama professor Ron Argelander) who sat inside a supermarket shopping cart, swathed in scarves and a thick, black veil. A stage-hand, made up as a hunchback, dressed in a kimono and wearing high, cumbersome wedgies, wheeled the animals and Mrs. Alving on and off stage, positioning them (and also climbing up and down a step ladder to work the lights) as directed by Smith, who played Oswald.

Most of the dialogue was pre-recorded on tape by Smith, using voices of different pitch that varied between a garbled hysteria and a ridiculously slow drone. Smith delivered his lines live, reading from a tattered script which eventually littered the stage along with the handfuls of glitter he produced from a pouch inside his pants. In Smith's adaptation, Oswald was transformed from a failed painter into a forgetful actor. Thus, despite the script he held in his hands, he would repeatedly ask Mrs. Alving to remind him of his place in the play. Although the tape appeared to

contain the entire play (with interpolations concerning Uncle Pawnshop and the Lucky Landlord Paradise), it was frequently inaudible, having to compete with the phonograph records of ocean sound-effects and exotic music.⁶

The Secret of Rented Island opened on Hallowe'en 1976 and ran into the new year. Performances began with the burning of an enormous quantity of incense and ended, several intermissionless hours later, with the playing of Doris Day's recording "(Once I Had A) Secret Love" and the ceremonial parting of Mrs. Alving's veil to reveal what Smith described as "a hideously grotesque mask of diseased decay." Purists should know that, in sequencing these slides, an hour of taped pre-performance preparation has been condensed to six minutes.

—J. Hoberman © 2000

¹ By the early 1970s, Smith's emphasis shifted to performance and he became, in effect, his own creature. Cinemaroc Nickelodeon productions were supplemented—if not supplanted—by a series of impossible-to-recreate slide shows and so-called live films. "A program of mine" means "extra trouble," Smith promised one Hamburg venue. "I am experimenting with various records as the film is projected and making other small corrections. This could be turned to advantage as a glamorous selling point. Often, there is repeat business because people can see the film gaining power as corrections are made and that is a new kind of film excitement." "Jack Smith Film Enterprises, Inc.," *Wait for Me at the Bottom of the Pool: The Writings of Jack Smith* ed. J. Hoberman and Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books, 1997) p.149.

A transcription of the *What's Underground About Marshmallows?* tape used by Vawter is included in *Wait for Me* op.cit. pp.137-43.

² Several images which Smith employed outline his ideas for an improved society, inescapably bring "The Plaster Foundation" to mind:

In the middle of the city should be a repository of-objects that people don't want anymore, which they would take to this giant junkyard. This center of unused objects would become a center of intellectual activity. Things would grow up around it.

"Uncle Fishhook and the Sacred Baby Poo-Poo of Art," *Wait for Me* op.cit. p.115.

³ See the detail descriptions by Jonas Mekas and Stefan Brecht in *Jack Smith: Flaming Creature—His Amazing Life and Times* ed. Edward Leffingwell (London: Serpent's Tail/PS 1 Museum, 1997)

⁴ Abbe Stubenhaus, who regularly participated in a number of these pieces, provides his first-hand testimony in David Reisman's dossier, "In the Grip of the Lobster: Jack Smith Remembered," *Millennium Film Journal* #23-24 (Winter 1990-91) pp. 69-72.

⁵ "Casting by Candlelight," *Soho Weekly News* (11/4/76) p.29.

⁶ Although the inanimate actors were given different voices on the tape, Smith sometimes indicated who was speaking by, for example, shutting off a light when Engstrand spoke and turning it back on when Manders delivered his line. I am told by someone who saw the production early in its run that originally there was no taped dialog, but that all the lines were delivered by Smith through a hole in one of the back curtains.