

## THE GIRLS AND A JOKE

Kimberly Alidio



Something is going on with speech and making a living and making art. They direct their rage and gooey tomatoes at the cinema newsreel of fascist military activities, warplanes overhead. Silhouettes taking charge before the movie screen get it, too: splat. A line delivered in rehearsal—"Our duty is to look after our home and husband and children and husband"—is too performative for the director: "Oh, please, try and sound as though you're a bit interested." Something is going on so an artist's affect isn't consumable if you cut their art from their living situations.

*The Girls* opens with architecture, windows, light, a tree, silhouette, reflection, compressed sans serif titles on the top of a static frame. Echoey, distant chatter cues in, changing abstract form into a part of a house. The static camera moves to take several vantage points in a living room. We settle atop a coffee table around which Liz reads from Aristophanes sardonically, and Gunilla reads while gesturing for a lighter, lighting her cigarette with someone's half-smoked cigarette, and accepting a cup of coffee or tea from Marianne, who props herself across the table to listen.

Without their director or audience, they do a read-through of *Lysistrata* by freely and dynamically engaging with one another, with furniture, daylight through big windows, activity in other rooms, a ringing telephone. Here's Cauleen Smith in a 2011 interview saying that negotiated relationships are critical "to get an image on film":

"When the documents of such exchanges are exhibited, we call this social practice. I'm interested in this as a mode of investigation, but not to put these engagements on display. All these intense relationships are private, they're not exploited—that's the part of filmmaking I actually like, you know what I mean?" Liz reads a line about the demands of housework and husband, and Gunilla's husband calls to ask when she'll be home. Without change of clothes, hair, pace, or stride—glasses and expression steady—, Liz walks right to left along the daylight windows of the house into a spot-lit black box theater. Whenever I present my poetry beyond spaces of "intense relationships [that] are private,...not exploited," I too attempt a dreamy stroll across the seamless threshold into the culture industry.

Marianne, fresh from a fight with her partner and with infant in tow, is late to rehearse a scene in which her character is chastised for arriving late to a meeting. The director chastises her for being late and not knowing her lines. Flashback to the park where she grabs her child from the arms of a man and storms off, baby stroller dragging behind her. The baby's wailing in flashback bleeds into rehearsal. A slight uptick in the cry's frequency tells us the baby is crying now off-stage, not just in flashback at the park. Marianne shakes herself out of the bleed of conflicts to cross the rehearsal stage and get her wallet from her purse. She crosses the stage again to send her helper and her infant away with bus fare.

Cut to Liz getting shampooed at a beauty salon as Gunilla's dogs are shampooed at a dog salon. Liz and Gunilla's dogs get blow-dried and groomed. Marianne tries on lipstick in the mirror of a department store. Her eyes dart around as she hears her infant wailing. She quickens her steps. She runs down a rainy sidewalk,

and over a bridge. She does a desperate dance with her umbrella blown inside-out. She finds her infant peacefully playing on the floor of her apartment, watched by a woman we aren't supposed to pay much attention to. Something is going on in the intimate thresholds of the gig economy to get me here, with you, to watch Mai Zetterling's *The Girls*.

A man calls his two mistresses, who pick up phones one-by-one in very mistress-y bedrooms. Gunilla stands in the middle of an empty park, her dogs off leash. The crane shot moves to a medium shot. She holds her head as if she's listening intently to the phone wires above, to her husband and his mistresses on the phone in their respective high-rise apartments. I write here towards a joke in the loose vernaculars of weary attention. Sound disrupts the scene as a sign of what won't stay outside the spaces of making art: what's off-screen, what's in the past, what's from one's internal monologue, and what's pressing in the activities of daily living.

The director chastises Marianne once again for bringing her baby to rehearsal. Returning to the scene, she struggles with the next line, and Liz, playfully clowns her own line, with a giggle and an elbow nudge. Marianne gives into the joke, and raises her head to the director with a gaze that's weary, direct, and undeniable. A joke: an art gig is a running gag. It's a gag which finds release in wordplay running through art gigs, big and small, and exposes all the labor of paying and receiving attention, of reading from a script at hand with another script refusing to stay in the background. Rather than actually talk to people I know who've been admitted to prestigious institutions and ask them what admission actually brings to their living, I just send off half-serious applications. I assume an ease of belonging in the paraliterary world to move between "all these intense relationships [that] are private...not exploited" and all those that are otherwise. In this marketing of myself to myself, I'm sometimes disoriented. Am I like my influences, contemporaries, peers, and friends? Most immediately, am I like my beloved?

Gunilla does a dramatic striptease in a club for her shocked husband and the two bored mistresses. All her castmates then strip with the verve of riot grrls as Athenian women of the play rampage the war machine. Liz invites the audience to stay for an unstructured talkback. Awakened by the curtain call from their cartoonish snoring, the audience stares as Liz calls them out: "You're sitting there, like stuffed creatures. Say something!" Silence, a bit briefer than before. "Don't you see? We've got to talk to each other." I can boil down the past year of intense poetry paratextual activity to this lesson: deliver a frisson that won't linger past the space of art or become anything other than someone else's private life. Not that I'm very good at following this dictum. I extend poetry into a hope that the world can share the labor of attention if we all utter freaky speech.

They don't quite get how their hustling across all the performances and rehearsals of their living and art-making doesn't stir audiences to see their own lives anew as matrices of potential connection and collective action against imperialist genocide.

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Reporters, now, asking for a sincere statement on why they directly addressed the nice audience looking for a nice evening. Disconnection is usually blamed on the body that keeps living in contradiction to a regime. —"You demonstrate elsewhere as well?" —"Yes." —"Do you sign petitions?" —"Now and then." —"But why tonight?" —"That's beside the point." —"Then why react tonight? Was it something personal? Has anything special happened?" —"No...but of course it's personal. I feel personally involved in this." —"Politically involved?" —"I want people to understand each other and stop fighting." —"Are you politically involved?" —"Yes, but not well informed." —"Don't you like the play as it is?" —"Yes, it's wonderful." —"Your part, you mean." —"No, the play." —"Yet, you want to change it." —"No, it's myself I want to change."

—"You see, this play is very important. Immensely important because it has to do with our day and age." —"If it's so important, could you tell us more precisely what it's about." —"Well, it's rather hard to explain. It's about how things stand... now." —"To be a bit more precise..." —"It's about... women and war." —"I thought it was about girls and boys." —"Did you?" —"[They never take anything seriously. —What woman ever does?]" Camaraderie subverts the interview and overturns the open-air market of ideas and images. —"But, joking apart, what is it about?" —"This play actually is a joke." —"But with a very serious message." —"Yet no laughing matter." Liz and Gunilla free themselves from their sincere cultural work to light cigarettes and act the bigger fool. Now Marianne laughs the hardest.

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☐ Kimberly Alidio is the author of *Teeter* (Nightboat Books), *why letter ellipses* (selva oscura press), *once teeth bones coral*: (Belladonna\* Collaborative), and *after projects the resound* (Black Radish Books).

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\* Image adapted from original 1969 Czech poster for Mai Zetterling's: *The Girls* (art by Eva Galova-Vodrazkova)