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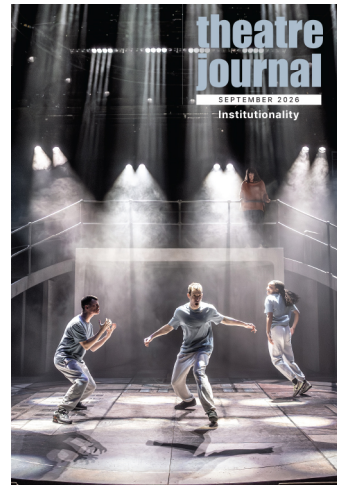
Voyage into Infinity by Narcissister (review)

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cuts across." The staging and design made manifest the ways political borders shape lives, destroy families—and the ways stories resist these effects.

Hundreds and Hundreds of Stars was part of a larger movement of performances in Chicago responding to the immigration raids outside the theatre doors. I watched *Hundreds of Stars* with around twenty-five of my students about a month after the raids began. These students hailed from around the US and from at least five other countries. They sat transfixed throughout the play as the slow-motion disaster of Clara's deportation played out against the backdrop of an ordinary life, laughing along with the jokes about weed and nagging mothers. When Clara was forced to say goodbye to her family, the group fell silent, watching the tragedy that was somehow both telegraphed and shocking. This scene and the play overall spoke to the specific political moment in fall 2025, when every day we were bombarded with stories of families ripped apart with no notice.

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VOYAGE INTO INFINITY. Created and directed by Narcissister. NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, New York. January 16, 2026.

Presented as part of the 2026 Under the Radar festival, *Voyage into Infinity* was created by Narcissister—a Brooklyn-based feminist performance artist who keeps her identity strictly secret behind a signature plastic mask in a powerful challenge to cultural stereotypes. The Skirball stage was filled with a massive kinetic apparatus assembled from reclaimed everyday materials: ropes and pulleys, inclined tracks and seesaws constructed from wood and iron plates, suspended sandbags, stacked buckets, and lines of dominoes made from fruit crates. At the center of the stage stood the statue of a discus thrower. Three performers—Narcissister herself joined by Effie Bowen and Dorchel Haqq—remained anonymous and virtually interchangeable throughout. Their faces were concealed behind Narcissister's signature masks, which were repurposed from 1960s wig-display mannequin heads and rendered in different skin tones. Their doll-like anonymity is central to Narcissister's two-decade performance practice, unsettling fixed categories of identity, beauty, and race. From a synthesizer station at house left, musician Holland Andrews performed a grotesque, ethereal live score of montaged feminine vocal fragments, while a three-piece band (Justin Frye, Austin Sley Julian, and Gregory Fox) waited unseen behind the upstage backdrop.

The performance was an intermediate live iteration of an artwork destined to take final form as a performance video. Narcissister described it as a deconstructive parody of Peter Fischli and David Weiss's *The Way Things Go* (1987), a thirty-minute video in which a Rube Goldberg machine constructed from everyday objects unfolds through chain reaction. In the original, montage erases all evidence of human participation. Tires roll, liquids flow, flames ignite—everything produces the objective allure of mechanical causality. However, that automaticity depends entirely on human labor that has been edited out, along with countless adjustments and resets. If Fischli and Weiss provoke metaphysical meditation on physical laws and nonhuman mechanistic, Narcissister's feminist provocation toyed with, even denigrated, that seriousness, exposing the white male-centered clichés underlying this obsession with objectivity. Her ambition lay not in formal appropriation but in marking a critical distance through displacement: restoring the (female) body to visible, laboring presence at the machine's heart.

The performance's feminist interventions were evident from the opening. The three performers emerged from a wooden cabinet in a corner of the stage, holding lit candles, and slowly inspected the apparatus. They paused before the discus thrower, a symbol of sublime white male power. Then, almost without warning, one raised her candle to burn through a cord; the balance broke, a sandbag plummeted from above, and the statue collapsed thunderously. The performers took turns mimicking the discus-throwing posture in the statue's place. In a comical fashion, they held fragile porcelain plates instead of marble—an unmistakable allusion to the weight of domestic labor.

By reintroducing pauses and ruptures into the interaction between naked bodies and this reconstructed apparatus, Narcissister generated a suspense that felt nontheatrical: It derived not from dramatic narrative but from the real-time contingency of physical processes that could genuinely fail—closer to the circus or the magic act than to the play. Chain sequences frequently stalled midcourse: a rolling object came to rest; a domino line halted; and the machine simply waited for the performers' continuation, lubrication, or manipulation. The performers were thus at once agents and patients, erasing the divide between human and apparatus. Because they remained completely silent, and because the apparatus was so intricate, there was no way to tell whether a given stall was scored or a breakdown. In one sequence, a performer knocked over a tower of water cups, triggering a chain collapse. Although such actions often carried an obvious intentionality, more than once the house held its breath, uncertain whether we had witnessed a genuine mishap or its rehearsed image. This ten-



Narcissister performs in *Voyage into Infinity* at NYU Skirball Center. (Photo: Walter Wlodarczyk.)

sion constituted the performance's primary affective force, occasionally relieved by physical slapstick and reaching a pleasurable climax whenever the apparatus suddenly, dazzlingly ran its course.

The radical feminist discourse with which the production was in conversation has long delineated how the myth of automaticity has served throughout the history of capitalism and racism to suppress and marginalize various forms of labor, forcing them to be cheap or free. Women are expected to stay away from market-economy labor while being required to perform unpaid labor of care, maintenance, reproduction, and housework. This is why the performers' actions were neither those of masters nor of pure patients but instead a story of cautious negotiation with the apparatus as system.

In the Skirball iteration, such overt symbolism was tempered by a subtler register. Where earlier iterations of the performance featured performers smearing lipstick maniacally over their faces and bodies, this version included a scene in which a performer danced with balloons tied to her wrists, releasing and recapturing them until she lay prostrate and gasping, before the performers popped the balloons with their nearly spent bodies. This was a repetitive labor with no result while intensifying the sense of a system on the verge of collapse.

The performance's climax arrived when one performer, having shed everything but the mask, swung out over the stage on the high swing the apparatus had assembled. The backdrop suddenly parted and amid violent lighting shifts, a punk band assaulted the sonic space with terrifying noise. Andrews pushed through an emergency exit to abandon the synthesizer station and reemerge as the band's vocalist, a dark metal voice that completely reversed the preceding atmosphere. If one views the work as a retrospective on the history of feminist struggle, this raw punk power paid the most direct homage to the radical art of the 1970s. In one passage (which elicited audible gasps from the audience), one performer lay naked on a rotating wheel at centerstage—the discus thrower's former position—with a lit sparkler in her genitals, spinning rapidly as in ritual or celebration. The image recalled Carolee Schneemann's body-centered feminist performance *Interior Scroll* (1975) as well as the experimental theatres hidden in downtown cafés and immigrant attics that became the spiritual symbols of a generation's movements for gender, racial, and sexual liberation.

At the same time, institutionalization shadowed the work in concrete ways. Commissioned by Brooklyn's Pioneer Works (where it premiered in 2024), the performance originally occupied an open space in which audience and performers were em-

bedded together within the apparatus, allowing its power to cede from the precision of causality to affect, desire, and embodiment. Skirball's proscenium weakened that semicoercive invitation as the clear performer-spectator divide enhanced the allure of stage spectacle. The extension from fifty to eighty minutes, accommodating venue programming, further diminished radicality, as suspense sometimes slackened into hesitation, then boredom. And although the performers did clear away debris and restore parts of the apparatus toward the end, the labor of construction itself—the collection and transportation of these large-scale materials—remained invisible, to some extent undermining the work's own claims about making hidden labor visible.

Perhaps this is why the final scene could be read as an elegy. As the band fell silent and the lights dimmed, the performers rearranged their clothing and climbed one by one back into the cabinet from which they had emerged. The last raised her candle, examined each part of the apparatus they had agitated and partly restored, blew out the flame, and closed the cabinet door. It was a quiet memorial to a time when unfettered radical subversion still had room outside the institution. Whether the forthcoming video will recover that room—or complete through its own montage the very erasure of labor the work set out to expose—remains this voyage's open question.

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THE MOST SPECTACULARLY LAMENTABLE TRIAL OF MIZ MARTHA WASHINGTON.

By James Ijames. Directed by Brett Ashley Robinson. The Wilma Theater, Philadelphia. March 28, 2026.

In the Wilma Theater's production of James Ijames's *The Most Spectacularly Lamentable Trial of Miz Martha Washington*, a red curtain served as a backdrop to a ghostly outline of a colonial kitchen composed of a stone hearth and benches. A single bed was illuminated in stark isolation to the rest of the set on stage left. The set's strategic gaps and interplay of shadow and light offered a metaphor for how US history is constructed—some details brightly illuminated, others deliberately obscured. The space was less a faithful reconstruction than an invitation to scrutinize what is remembered, forgotten, or sanitized in the nation's collective memory.

Set on Christmas Eve, 1800, the play follows a feverishly ill Martha Washington (Nancy Boykin)

as she hallucinates encounters with her enslaved servants, believing they are trying to kill her. The play opened with enslaved residents Doll (Jada Mayo), Priscilla (Ciera Gardner), Ann (Kimberly S. Fairbanks), Sucky Boy (Anthony Martinez-Briggs), and Davy (Steven Anthony Wright) tending to Martha and debating her fate. It is revealed that upon Martha's death, those enslaved at the estate would be freed. As the group prayerfully intercedes for Martha's healing, Martha's feverish imaginings begin, marked by the emergence of Ann's son, William (Jayson Brown), from under Martha's bed. Greeting his "Auntie Granny," William shared the story of America. His monologue and Martha's declaration of herself as the "Mother of America" stood in pointed contradiction. The set mirrored this discordance as physical walls appeared, evoking the contours of a circus tent. The domestic setting became a liminal arena where past, present, and future blurred and distinctions of time and labels dissolved.

The sound design by Jordan McCree enhanced the set changes and thematic content by utilizing haptic effects—sound vibrations felt physically—to heighten the audience experience. Distorted transitions drew on hip hop, blues, and rock, underscoring the foundational role of Black artistry in US culture. Contemporary songs like Rihanna's "Woo" made the legacy of slavery feel both seductive and inescapable by echoing the coercion, possessiveness, and imbalance inherent in historical systems of power. Just as the singer in "Woo" tries to lure back her former lover with little real affection, Martha seeks to manufacture closeness with her enslaved servants—not out of genuine care, but out of self-preservation. Nikki Delhomme's costumes evoked period detail while allowing anachronistic flourishes to accentuate the sonic landscape. In



The chorus stares at Martha Washington in combative silence. Left to right: Nancy Boykin, Ciera Gardner, Jayson Brown, Jada Mayo, Anthony Martinez-Briggs, and Steven Anthony Wright. (Photo: Johanna Austin.)