

An A-fair to Remember

TONI BENTLEY BRINGS HER ANAL SEX MEMOIR TO THE STAGE

'I'm an extremist, but I'm also a regular woman.'

By Rachel Kramer Bussel

THEATER

The overwhelming success of *Fifty Shades of Grey* tells Toni Bentley something important about women today: They're not having good sex. "If a woman has really had amazing sex, this book is not going to work for her," Ms. Bentley said during a recent interview in an east side café. "So it's telling us that they're still not having it. This is a Disney fantasy. It worries me that women are going to continue fantasizing and never get the real thing. Let's make the Disney fantasy real in your bedroom tonight."

Ms. Bentley's own work may be, as she freely admits, about fantasy, but it is anything but a Disney version. A former Balanchine dancer, she made a splash in 2004 with *The Surrender*, her memoir of her sexual (and spiritual and intellectual) awakening through anal sex, told through her relationship with a man she refers to only as A-Man. These days, she's back in the news again, with *The Surrender* adapted for a play that opens this week at the Clurman Theater.

In the one-woman show, actress Laura Campbell dramatically advises, "Enter the exit. Paradise awaits," and then bends down to afford the audience a view of her black silk robe-covered bottom. She gives a mini lecture on a diagram

of the human digestive tract, using a riding crop as a pointer. "Where else in the body are conscious and unconscious so closely connected?" she purrs, "and so easily probed? Where's Dr. Freud?"

This is actually the second time *The Surrender* has made its way to the stage. The impetus for its first theatrical outing came at the dinner table of Spanish director Fernando Trueba. A discussion of the book, which had just come out in Spain, inspired his son, Jonás, to mention it to his collaborator, the actress Isabelle Stoffel. Ms. Stoffel saw its theatrical potential and approached Ms. Bentley about performing it as a monologue. She crafted a script and performed her one-woman show of the book first in Madrid in 2012 and then last year at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival.

The script for the New York show is by Ms. Bentley, who also offered guidance on the production. The text is verbatim from *The Surrender*, but Ms. Campbell, the actress—Ms. Bentley insists that the stage version is "a character," though one based on her life—infuses it with a humor only glimpsed in the book. Where *The Surrender* reads almost as prescriptive—with Ms. Bentley seeming intent on persuading women readers of the transformative glories of anal sex, though she claims

she's only covering her personal experience—Ms. Campbell, in the play, is by turns coquettish (as when she lifts up her gown to reveal the tops of her stockings) and histrionic (impersonating the throes of orgasm, tossing her hair around while humping a pillow or slipping on a blindfold, holding up a pair of crotchless panties and shooting them into the air). "To me, humor is the enemy of authority," said the play's director, Zishan Ugurlu, an associate professor of theater at the New School, "and I wanted to highlight it."

As for Ms. Bentley, she is as intent on her message as she was when her book came out. She bemoans women faking orgasms to please men. "I can't help thinking there'd be a revolution if every woman had the pleasure I know we're capable of," she said. Monogamy, at least for her, is overrated, insofar as it in-

flects things in the bedroom. "I function very well in reality, but this is not where I believe in having sex. Sex and reality is usually the end of erotic life. You start worrying about your in-laws, I hate his friends, your friend insulted me, and nobody's having sex anymore—certainly not good sex." And surrender doesn't mean weakness. "The amount of action and energy and input on my part to surrender to this man, both physically and emotionally, is probably more than he had in being the penetrator of my being."

Ms. Ugurlu, the director, was affected by what *The Surrender* had to say. "The sexual journey she created in the book was very similar to my understand-

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Laura Campbell in *The Surrender*.

ing of the creative process," she said. "She was challenging assumptions and taking risks. She took advantage of the unexpected." Ms. Ugurlu sees the play as "revolutionary." The voice that is speaking may be female, she said, but the big question it asks—Are you free in your sexual journey?—is addressed to men and women alike.

For all the play's raciness—from a threesome to the application of makeup to the "lower face"—both Ms. Bentley and Ms. Ugurlu insist that it is a love story, one that opens and closes to "Dance Me to the End of Love" by Leonard Cohen (whom

Ms. Bentley thanks in *The Surrender's* acknowledgments). A-Man, Ms. Campbell says onstage, "shattered the control panel of my being. With him, I was finally unafraid to die."

For Ms. Bentley, though, it is also about the pain that love can cause.

"What woman hasn't been obsessed with a man?" she asked, rhetorically, in the interview. Onstage, Ms. Campbell extolls the pleasures A-Man provides. But looking back on their torrid three-year affair with the wisdom of hindsight during the interview, Ms. Bentley likens it to an addiction to heroin (a drug she admits she has never tried). "When you're high, they say that is as good as it gets; it's nirvana. Then you endlessly chase that first high. He was my heroin. When he shows up and he loves you and he fucks you bet-

ter than anyone ever has, you're on top of the world. And then he leaves or never calls, and you go into misery."

Ms. Bentley may be somewhat ambivalent about the definition of modern feminism but is unequivocal about being "militantly pro-woman." "First wave, second wave—this is not my culture," she said. "I'm just a woman telling the truth about her sex life; that can be taken in all kinds of feminist ways." She wants women to "have the right to hate me, but I would like every woman to have enormous power, which includes her erotic life, and the power to choose submission if she wants to and not be ashamed of that. Real power is choice. Whether it's 'I want to be submissive, I want to get pissed on, I want to dominate you, I want to put an enema up that guy'—you have the choice and can manifest it."

If this sounds extreme, Ms. Bentley doesn't disagree. "I'm an extremist, and I always will be," she said. "But I'm also a regular woman." She hopes the play inspires other regular women anew. "I feel like there's a higher purpose," she said. "Maybe another woman will say, 'I come like that too.' Or 'I always wanted to do that—she did that, so maybe I'll do that, too.' Besides, I'm sure I come like a million other women; they're just not saying it."

Before publishing *The Surrender*, she was warned that its explicitness would damage her career as a dance writer. Instead, it led to a Guggenheim Fellowship and writing gigs with *Vogue* and *Vanity Fair*. "It's the ass that keeps on giving," she joked, and there may well be another memoir in her future. "I'm a truth teller. I can only imagine there will be more." **NYO**



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