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Recovering Ritual

By Deborah Jowitt

**Sara Pearson/Patrik
Widrig and Company**

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The lights come on, and there's Sara Pearson, wearing a drab black dress, her hair pulled back and neatly rolled. If you ignore her bare feet and let the melancholy song that's playing (Neapolitan, I think) color your thinking, you can cast her as a respectable Italian widow—framed by lighting designer Tony Giovanetti for a solemn portrait. Then, face expressionless, she begins to pass an orange from hand to hand (life, death, life, death, the Lord gives, the Lord takes away). But, although her demeanor never changes, she does increasingly odd things with the orange, and its rolling over her body acquires an erotic charge. After men and women wearing similar dark, respectable clothes have laid a grid of fruit and vegetables, she turns and watches Patrik Widrig come and go.

He's dancing with his usual luscious, dreamy suppleness (pitted with surprising kinks), and it's easy to imagine him as a remembered beloved.

I'm always impressed by the ideas Pearson and Widrig tackle. Their dramatic pieces range over a variety of cultures and take a variety of forms. *Ordinary Festivals* pushes the rituals of a traditional community over the edge into mysterious, subversive, and often funny little acts. I say "acts" because each is self-contained (although there are recurrent motifs—see under "oranges"). The cast of 12 stands and politely applauds what sounds like a fascist speech. Pearson and Philip Kain III read letters, then solemnly shred them with cheese graters. The same two lust to best each other in a heated contest that involves catching oranges tossed to them on the point of a knife (she cheats; he wins anyway). People rush in and jump ebulliently on a Persian rug that's been unrolled for the purpose, then hustle away. People form lines and, in attempted unison, spin dinner plates.

All the behavior is highly patterned. The parade of juicy, emotional Italian songs rarely elicits an obvious response, unless you count

running and tumbling as intrinsically passionate. In one passage, the ensemble, accompanied only by their audible breathing, stitches a living patchwork quilt out of small gestures. In a similar scene (unfortunately programmed right after this), men build a design out of sharp, abortive gestures and truncated sentences.

The oranges become omnipresent symbols: sliding down little wooden chutes as if at some weird packing plant, balanced on parts of the body, passed from hand to hand in tidy patterns, thrown, dodged. The piece embarks on an increasingly perilous fence-sit between variations that accumulate power and meaning and a clever display of how many things you can do with an orange. In the end, it topples over onto the second side. The audience is delighted anyway. What did I expect? That they'd give the deeper images more weight, perhaps. That I'd receive a little more bitterness, a trace of sourness to collide with the sweet taste of the oranges handed around afterward.