

# Hear Me, Embrace Me

Submitted by [Leah Richards](#) on March 14, 2018 - 11:19

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## *Tentacles*

Written by Tessa Flannery

Directed by Rebecca Cunningham

Estrogenius Festival

Presented by Voyage Theater Company at the Kraine Theater, NYC

March 10-15, 2018

We were disappointed that we were unable to fit Tessa Flannery's intriguingly premised *Tentacles* into our schedule during its recent engagement at the FRIGID 2018 festival, so we were excited to learn that it would be part of the 18th annual Estrogenius festival. Estrogenius, which runs from March 8 to March 24, is a celebration of female and gender non-conforming artists, and has expanded from its origins as a short-play festival to include music, dance, short plays, comedy, burlesque, and even a walking event. (Among those events is an encore performance of FRIGID's winner of Best Solo Drama, Artemisia's *Intent*, reviewed here a few weeks ago.) *Tentacles* takes on the fraught debates around feminism, consent, porn, and fantasy -- a conversation that is itself something of a many-limbed monster -- with intelligence, humor, and nuance.

Flannery's play approaches its subject through the frame of a presentation on "Feminist Ravishment Fantasies" at an academic conference on feminist pornography. The presenter, Tessa (Tessa

Flannery), draws a distinction between the terms ravishment and rape when discussing sexual fantasies, arguing that the former involves the subject being in control while the latter denotes an act of aggression. Within the category of ravishment fantasies, she takes tentacle erotica, most commonly today an animated genre, as her particular focus, discussing both its historical context in examples from an 1814 Japanese woodcut to works by Picasso to '70s and '80s horror film to the novel *My Secret Garden*, as well in the more personal context of a particular individual's discovery of the genre. At a certain, extremely effectively staged point, the play adds a male interlocutor: Chris (Chris Fayne), an actor of Japanese descent who performs in hardcore sci-fi-themed pornography. Chris begins by pushing back on what he sees as Tessa's cultural othering, her academic pronouncements on a society that she knows only through written accounts. His unmasked-for insertion of himself into the proceedings leads to wide-ranging wrangling over the stereotypes, assumptions, and ideological arguments around pornography. Tessa and Chris touch on, for instance, female fans of gay male porn and erotica, racism in the adult video industry, and even Shakespeare's *Pericles*, in which virgin Marina is threatened with rape to get her used to working in a brothel (one of many Shakespearean examples that could have been selected). Their disagreements raise complicated issues of agency, power, and representation. What if viewers generalize specific fantasies, such as ravishment fantasies, to be what all women want? What does it mean to be a pro-sex feminist, and does that prevent one from criticizing certain types of sexual representation? And, perhaps bringing all of these issues together, what would feminist tentacle porn look like?

*Tentacles* avoids easy answers and simple characterization. Tessa's reaction to Chris's all-but "well, actually"s as she presents work in her field of study and her awareness of seeming inconsistencies between her academic work and her fantasies are so true-to-life that you can see the audience wanting to intervene. Chris could be right that Tessa is

engaging in a kind of academic cultural tourism, but the defense of "you don't understand the culture" can also be used to justify just about anything (just look at any comment section for articles about sexuality and underage characters in anime or video games). He seems to defend sexual expression but holds the regressive attitude that women who like things like tentacle erotica must be sexually unfulfilled by their husbands or boyfriends, and Tessa speaks for all women when she disabuses him of this idea. Even Chris's defense that performers in ravishment scenarios set and agree to their boundaries beforehand is not uncritically accepted (in an unfortunate but instructive coincidence, an article was posted on the website Jezebel as this review was being written detailing a claim by two female performers of abusive boundary violations despite filmed consent agreements). The play emphasizes the murkiness that can exist along the boundary between (academic and feminist) theory and practice, between fantasy life and real life, by having Tessa occasionally be taken over by her own examples — the stripper, the woman in peril — fantasies erupting into the analytic narrative. The boundary of consent in the real world, however, is not in question. Fantasizing about something does not constitute tacit permission; and Chris's notion that Tessa should own her tastes in sexual fantasy may be in itself defensible, but the way in which he tries to compel her to do so absolutely is not.

Flannery and Fayne inhabit their characters, and we can confirm first-hand that the play really nails the discourse of academic conferences, which Chris completely disrupts. Tessa and Chris are believable characters in a slightly absurd situation. The production, while very entertaining, also smartly produces in the audience from time to time some of the same feelings of discomfort that Tessa discusses or undergoes. In asking why we still think it isn't normal for women to enjoy something like tentacle erotica, *Tentacles* asks larger questions about the conflicts within (academic) feminism, and the result is a... stimulating hour of theater. - Leah Richards & John Ziegler

# Tentacles

Written by Tessa Flannery; Directed by Rebecca Cunningham

Part of the 2018 FRIGID New York Festival

Off Off Broadway, Play

Runs through 3.2.18

UNDER St. Marks, 94 St. Marks Place

by *Sarah Weber* on 3.3.18



Tessa Flannery in

*Tentacles*. Photo by Jody Christopherson.

**BOTTOM LINE:** A woman's doctoral thesis about tentacle porn is hilariously turned inside out by an old flame and his unsolicited help.

Before the house lights dim, we watch writer-performer Tessa Flannery sitting in a corner of the stage scribbling in her notebook. Above her head reads “Feminist Ravishment Fantasies: Why do we still have to answer this question?” Once the play starts, we learn we’re at a conference that brings together feminist scholars and adult entertainment professionals, and Flannery’s character is about to present her doctoral thesis. She has spent months of research on the subject of ravishment fantasies and on a “female test subject” who genuinely enjoys tentacle porn, a genre where women are forced into sex acts with monsters that have tentacles. She has collected all relevant data, all of her facts are memorized inside and out, and she has done more than her fair share of historical and cultural research—she’s prepared. What could go wrong?

Just as Flannery dives into tentacle porn’s historical roots in Japan, her former colleague and old flame Chris Fayne, who also happens to be a porn star, shouts from the audience to—you guessed it—interrupt her. Over the course of the play Fayne takes over the presentation and forces Flannery to publically reveal more about herself and her own fantasies than she’s comfortable with. Along the way, *Tentacles* cleverly addresses various issues ranging from the downright hilarious to the deeply uncomfortable.

To be clear, it’s a good thing that *Tentacles* makes you squirm in your seat. In the wake of the #MeToo movement it has become increasingly evident that sex and consent must be addressed regardless of whether the conversations are easy. Much to my relief, Flannery and Fayne’s characters challenge each other, making the production a nuanced exploration that demonstrates why topics like feminist ravishment fantasies are still fraught with difficult questions.

No matter how off course the presentation goes, Flannery continues to challenge Fayne even if he doesn’t seem to be listening. Even as he pressures Flannery to confess her sexual fantasies, she quickly reminds Fayne about the dramatically different consequences women and men face when admitting to such personal information. That said, it’s also difficult to dismiss Fayne as a mere man interruption. When he first speaks up, he points out potential gaps in Flannery’s understanding of tentacle porn’s current role in Japanese culture (he’s Japanese). His argument can’t go ignored, especially in today’s increased calls for intersectionality in feminist discourse. At the same time, his valid points don’t excuse the highly problematic ways he takes over the show and disregards Flannery’s comfort levels.

Another aspect of *Tentacles* is Flannery’s personal asides. Throughout the presentation, the stage is suddenly awash in red light and we enter Flannery’s imagination. For brief moments we watch her fantasies come to life in a highly campy fashion; they’re so vivid and intense for Flannery that once the lights change back she needs to put herself together. Director Rebecca Cunningham does an excellent job at making these asides both separate from and an intrinsic part of how Flannery’s character navigates her presentation. They infuse *Tentacles* with much needed humor that fully embraces the weirdness of sexual fantasies without the shame that typically follows them.

These fantasies are only snippets—we never see them finish a full narrative arch. Likewise, most of the arguments that Flannery and Fayne start remain unresolved. This includes the cultural debate, which is both frustrating and problematic in and of itself. But it's also clear that Flannery has no intention of wrapping questions around feminist ravishment fantasies in a neat little bow. It's a complicated conversation, so leaving the theater with more questions than when we first entered is to be expected, if not encouraged.

(*Tentacles* plays at UNDER St. Marks, 94 St. Marks Place, through March 2, 2018. The running time is 50 minutes. Performances are Thu 2/15 at 10:30, Sat 2/17 at 2:10, Wed 2/21 at 8:50, Fri 2/23 at 8:50, and Fri 3/2 at 5:30. Tickets are \$10 and are available at [horsetrade.info](http://horsetrade.info).)

*Tentacles* is by Tessa Flannery. Directed by Rebecca Cunningham. Fight/Intimacy Direction by Claire Warden. Workshop Dramaturg is Jolene Noelle. Production Stage Manager is Claudia Toth.

The cast is Tessa Flannery and Chris Fayne.

Tentacles

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## Five Fringe Shows, So Many Flights of Stairs

APRIL 15, 2018 ~ ALEX WALSH

**Day 3 of Fringe was my marathon day, in which I attempted a feat only dreamed of before. Five shows in one day! I did it, with the help of food trucks, coffee, \$3 cocktails, and a brief nap in my car.**



**Having learned from the previous day's mad rush, I arrived early for my first show. The helpful volunteers got me all checked in, and when the time came, led me downstairs for TENTACLES, from Voyage Theater Company. TENTACLES takes the form of a thesis presentation by Tessa (played by Tessa Flannery, who also wrote the show) studying the ravishment fantasies of an "anonymous subject" and attempting to reconcile them with her feminism.**

**The lecture is interrupted consistently. At first by the speaker/subject's own fantasies, cutaway scenes lit in red that Tessa then sheepishly recovers from, and then by a spectator. We eventually learn that Chris (portrayed by Chris Fayne), was invited by Tessa to watch her presentation. But the Shakespearian actor-turned-porn star, who she had secret fantasies about during their college years, takes it upon himself to set the record straight on aspects of her thesis that he**

**disagrees with. A good chunk of the crowd I was in didn't realize at first that Chris was part of the show, so I got to enjoy people grumbling at him for heckling until his interjections escalated enough that he was clearly a cast member.**

**Despite being framed as a literal lecture, Flannery's writing does a great job of raising the issues of the #metoo movement in a way that feels natural to the story and the characters. Chris' interruptions are played for laughs until they aren't, underscoring that Tessa has the final say in where the line is drawn. With great writing and acting throughout, this was a definite highlight of the weekend.**

## **What Do Tentacles, Judy Blume, and Anxiety Have in Common?**

**APRIL 7, 2018 ~ CARSON SINGER**

**Anxiety and depression were followed by a peek into the complex politics of the erotic during the next performance of the evening. TENTACLES, by the Voyage Theater Company, takes as its premise a feminist lecturer speaking on the topic of ravishment fantasies, specifically tentacle based ones. The show is self-described as a feminist harpooning of Tentacle Porn, and it is that, but it's also**



**more. Creator Tessa Flannery and director Rebecca Cunningham do harpoon, but also expose, complicate, and generally explore that specific yet somehow un-located space where pro-sex feminist politics mesh with and mash up against desire, fantasy and consent. My Fringe accomplice for the evening put it well when she said that at times she was laughing and then a minute later wanted to ask if the performer was ok. It's that kind of show, and it is refreshing to get a full range of experience. TENTACLES is an onion (or whatever layered metaphor you want) and the execution of the piece is well done.**

<http://goseeshowpodcast.com/2018/02/16/tessa-flannery-rebecca-cunningham-of-tentacles/>