

## In the Loop:

# Post-Postmodern Habits

By Jennifer Landes

(05/06/2010) Spring certainly brings its rewards to the East End and while many were enjoying the sun and warm temperatures on Saturday, another group found themselves inside experiencing a different kind of light and heat.

“Habit,” an installation and performance piece, was presented in workshop form at the Watermill Center on Saturday, a production co-commissioned by Toronto’s Luminato Festival. My original plan was to drop in, take in the “set,” conceived as a fully functioning ranch house, watch one of the loops of the play that was performed within it, and then go back to enjoying more recreational pursuits.

The problem was, three and a half hours later, I could barely tear myself away.

As this was a trial run, some of the elements that will be part of later and final presentations were abridged or dropped entirely. The completed piece will take place over nine hours; the workshop was a mere six. When I left, the actors were in the midst of a third go-round at the realist play that propels the production.

David Levine, who is the progenitor and director of the work and an artist in residence at the center, was watching it as the rest of us were, through windows or using the center’s catwalk for a “fly on the wall” perspective.

In this case, the house, designed by Marsha Ginsberg, was not fully realized or fully functioning. Instead, the makeshift edifice was erected with steel braces and plasterboard with framed doors and rough windows with sheer curtains. A modular layout was suggested with only one bedroom, a small living-dining area, kitchen, bathroom, and storage space.

While nonfunctioning, all of the required plumbing fixtures and appliances were accounted for, including a toilet, sink, and showerhead in the bathroom and a sink, refrigerator, oven, and functioning coffeemaker in the kitchen. While no larger than an apartment, the space still felt like a well-lived-in house with the actors’ clothes set up in closets, CDs in haphazard piles on the floor, plates and cutlery stacked in the sink, food that was really eaten, and a sheet thrown over a worn couch in what passes for decorating in a certain type of household.

In fact, the modifications necessary for the workshop made it its own kind of simulacrum, adding another layer of simulation to the work’s inherent themes of layered artifice in the post-postmodern condition.

There were three professional actors in the piece, Brian Bickerstaff as Mitch, Louis Cancelmi as Doug, and Erica Sullivan as Viv.

As conceived by Jason Grote, who was commissioned to write the piece as a kind of uber play, they are archetypes put in situations and relationships designed to register a full range of human emotion. If the tropes of brothers caught in a love triangle with a fallen woman, a tragic secret from the past, and each character’s struggle to rise above class and station are familiar, they are meant to be. The text is calculated to employ as many tried and true plot devices or character elements as



Jennifer Landes Photos

The audience for “Habit” watched the action unfold through windows, as David Levine, the director of the work, was doing here outside the left window, or above along the Watermill Center’s mezzanine. Below, the story that drives the performance piece involves a woman and two brothers and the psychosexual dynamic between them.

can be crammed into one story.

Early on, Viv deconstructs Halloween masks with the help of Roland Barthes in that hyper-articulate way students from certain progressive liberal arts colleges earnestly express themselves. She references Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche at other key junctures in the play as she moves about filming the characters with her smartphone, saying it's for her thesis in semiotics.

Mitchell is another contemporary archetype: the underemployed sensitive poet-rock-history geek who, unprompted, lets you know why Captain Beefheart is superior to Frank Zappa and can trace punk back to its 1960s garage band roots while referencing Elliott Smith, the poster boy for contemporary, tortured-artist "emo" music. His puppy-dog devotion to Viv disgusts her, and she makes this known loudly in a later scene.

Instead, Viv has a very complicated relationship with Doug, Mitchell's more pragmatic and essentialist brother. Rather than listen patiently to her explanation of semiotics, he dismisses the discussion with a string of expletives. Mitchell may be writing songs about her, but it is Doug that elicits a true physical response. He, in turn, describes her as a "coke whore," calling attention to their mutual exploitation, the common currency in a narcissistic culture.

Still, Viv gives both brothers quite a bit of bump and grind. From the beginning, there's plenty of sex, drugs, and rock 'n' roll piled on until the deep, dark secret is allowed to blow the whole thing apart. What is different here is that once it does, the action starts over from the beginning, following the same script but with different stagings, determined solely by the actors' choices.

Although the text functions mostly as a device in the overall work, it is also sacrosanct. During the workshop the actors carried copies of the script as they moved through the house. Mr. Levine said in the final version the actors will have memorized the lines. Still, there was something fitting about seeing them with the text, careful to refer to it when they needed to rather than ad-lib the dialogue.

As conceived, the text never varies even as the interpretation of how to deliver it must. It is like watching ever-new interpretations of a Shakespeare play, but in this case the delivery changes significantly with every 90-minute performance. It can be as subtle as an actor eating a sandwich in the second run or reinterpretations of how to violate or mutilate a squash from one loop to the next. A death scene is reimaged each time and the transition from end to beginning is fascinating to watch as it is rethought in each instance. After two weeks of rehearsals, even Mr. Levine said he was surprised by some of the actors' choices.



With communication solely through the scripted dialogue, the focus shifts to those choices, especially once the play has been performed in its entirety. Viewers become voyeurs as they follow the sometimes sordid, often banal action from one room to the next. For the most part, the unique layout of the Watermill Center allowed the audience to see into each room.

The final version will have a room in which the viewpoints of different cameras will be projected on several screens. Each one of those recordings will be saved as a document of the entire piece as well as its own separate film. As presented here, the experience was a direct theatrical performance, even as references to recording abounded and one real video camera taped the production, moving from various rooms and viewpoints.

While cultural references often focused on the high end of the spectrum, the self-described "white trash" characters were more akin to the much lower form of reality T.V. Anyone who has taken in a season of "The Real World," or "Real

Housewives,” or Real whatever, knows that in reality land (also a simulacrum as any 5 year old could demonstrate) there are just a few distinct personality types and if you bring them all together, only a handful of train-wreck outcomes are likely. Even so, audiences can’t seem to turn themselves away, waiting to see the same outcome again and again, hoping that something unexpected might happen and likely reassured when it doesn’t.

And within that synthetic construct lies an essential truth of the human condition. In some ways, we are all doomed to repeat the same plots on an endless loop. We refuse to leave the ranch house — even when escape is offered —preferring the familiar, even when it is bad, to unknown possibilities.