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“The Complete and Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill, Volume 2,” adapted by Christopher Loar

at Theater for the New City



Cara Francis, Dylan Marron, Roberta Colindrez, and Christopher Borg Photo by Hunter Canning. Photo credit: Carol Rosegg.

Review by Amy Stringer

Eugene O’Neill’s piercing gaze hovers over audience members as they meander into the Cino Theater, his portrait hanging haphazardly from a rope that wraps around the back and along the sides of the stage. From his perch, the legendary playwright witnesses his writing in action; however, these words he perhaps never intended an audience to hear.

This adaptation, developed by the New York Neo-Futurists and directed by Christopher Loar, is

pretty much exactly what it sounds like—a compilation of O’Neill’s stage directions, read aloud and meticulously reenacted with the help of five energetic performers. After the success of the play by the same name, Volume 1, the Neo-Futurists have come together once more to further explore O’Neill’s demanding stage directions, focusing on his earliest and most obscure works, including “Recklessness,” “Warnings,” “Fog,” “Abortion,” and “The Sniper.”

At the start of the show, piles of random props adorn the stage—tables, chairs, step stools, wooden frames, and the shapes of four bodies outlined on the floor, as if it were the scene of a brutal massacre. Dressed simply in black and gray, the performers enter, and as the smartly-dressed narrator, played by Cecil Baldwin, begins to read the words aloud, the actors dash frantically around the black box to find the necessary props insisted upon by the stage directions.

Though there is no spoken dialogue in the production, the performances are superb. Christopher Borg, with his large stature, booming voice and impressive ability to hold the most ridiculous facial expressions, transforms throughout the evening from angry husband to college jock to grieving father, with only the most loyal reliance upon O’Neill’s direction to guide him. Cara Francis, with her wide, emotive eyes and impressive comedic rhythm, seamlessly switches from an adulterous wife to a worn-down mother to a flirtatious schoolgirl. Dylan Marron fully commits to every role he portrays, whether it be a wailing young girl or a seductive chauffeur. Martina Potratz, stepping in for Roberta Colindrez, brings a grace to the stage that is especially effective during the more somber parts of the evening.

The actors follow O’Neill’s stage directions literally word for word—when someone is supposed to blush or turn pale, the actors enthusiastically cover their faces in red and white powder. However, there is still opportunity to incorporate their own artistic interpretation to the performance. When a stage direction calls for someone to “protest,” Dylan Marron slowly turns his head to the audience, uttering the words, “We are the 99%.”

The show, believe it or not, does not simply extract the humor that exists in O’Neill’s obsessive direction. As the characters bring the words on the page to life, it becomes clear that entire stories exist within the stage directions—there is no need for dialogue in order to understand the architecture, the mood and the stakes of the story. These actors are really playing an elaborate game of “Simon Says,” except, in this instance, it is a game of “O’Neill Says.” At times hilarious, at times thought-provoking, at times hauntingly beautiful, this production allows the audience to peer into the depths of O’Neill’s twisted, brilliant mind—you won’t be disappointed by what you see.

“The Complete and Condensed Stage Directions of Eugene O’Neill, Volume 2” runs through
May 11 at Theater for the New City, 155 First Ave, Manhattan. (212) 254-1109;
<http://www.theaterforthenewcity.net>.

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