



Source: Project 24/7

June 30, 2009

by Tim Treanor

Project 24/7 is to the Source Festival 2009 as *Iron Chef* is to cooking. In *Iron Chef*, culinary masters are assigned an ingredient (*squid!*) at random and told to construct an entire meal (*Squid Salad! Lemon Drop Squid Soup! Roast Squid with Béarnaise Sauce! Squid Ice Cream!*) around it - all in one hour. In Project 24/7, seven playwrights are given their themes at random, and late at night. They must construct a play around that theme, and then send the script to a director, who must, using actors chosen at random, produce and present that playwright's work - all in 24 hours.

This is, of course, an immensely difficult task, and if the result is something less than a masterpiece, it is easy to understand why. To help them, the playwrights in the Source's 24/7 contest were given a secret ingredient with which to work - dance. Every director was also a choreographer, and the roles were filled by dancers (each of whom was at least a competent actor). Dance relieves a lot of pressure on the dialogue, and is fun to watch, but playwrights need to be careful that it does not give them a sugar high. For example, what can we make of Ben Kingsland's *Dead Sexy?* (Theme: Love at the End of the World). T.S. Elliot speculated that the world ended not with a bang but a whimper. Kingsland's take on it is that it ends with two very buff guys (John Robert Keena and Aaron Mednick) attempting to do some - let's use Governor Sanford's term - sparking with the beautiful but fierce valkyrie Zombina (Na'la (Amy) Phillips), who either wishes to mate with them or eat them. Guys, next time, check out the name first! The dancing is beautiful (credit director and choreographer Melissa-Leigh Bustamante) but I'm unsure what it was that Kingsland handed over by way of the script. The dialogue was mostly grunts and single-word exclamations.

To me, the best-written entry was the one that took both its theme and the secret ingredient with a grain of salt. Juanita Rockwell's *Packing/Pecking* (Theme: Reversing the Pecking Order) featured a hardheaded man talking to a hardheaded woman. They are lamenting their otherworldly mates. He complains that his lady is obsessively knitting; she's making a "house cozy" now. She complains that her man is constantly undertaking useless projects, such as raising geese for their feathers. Their partners/victims are on stage with them. They know the joy of creating things that give comfort and pleasure, and the sorrow of being unable to share that joy. At the end, in a storm of unraveling yarn and blowing feathers, it appears as though the creative couple has discovered each other, while the hardheaded couple continues to give serial monologues about themselves. Good work by director/choreographer Mollye Maxner and a strong cast (Peter Vance, Alex Vaughn, Jessica Wanamaker and Mary Werntz). Plus, they played the music of the great Tom Waits in the background.

I was a little disappointed by the entries of two established playwrights. In Gwydion Suilebhan's *Remedial Lesson in Mercy for Judiciary Conservatives* (Theme: the Day Mercy Arrived) the accused (Chris Galindo) dances with a bound woman (Denise Jakobsberg) and a hanged girl (Ilana Silverstein; who says the dead can't dance?) while an angry judge (Annetta Dexter Sawyer) fumes. The play is mostly a series of one-word imprecations, spat out accusingly: "Testify!" "No!" "Punish!" "You!" "Mercy!" followed by more dancing. Brothers and sisters, I have been in a lot of courtrooms run by judicial conservatives, and it's not like that. I must say that Suilebhan has written before on the subject of mercy, convincingly and well. I just don't think he was on the mark here. Kelly Maxner directed and choreographed.

I was also not in love with Norman Allen's *Unfriendly Territory* (Theme: Life in Unfriendly Territory), in which a writer critical of Islamic practices regarding women (Michael Grew) is given what for by three Moslem women in burqas (Shannon Listol, Rose McConnell, and director-choreographer Laura Shandelmeier). Amidst a great deal of dance, the women argue that the burqas are actually empowering, in that they compel men to see them differently than Western men see women. This argument would have been more convincing had they not removed their head scarves to dance, however. Notwithstanding all that, I must report that Shandelmeier is a hell of a dancer, and that my dear bride and editor (they are the same person) had a much better opinion of this piece than I did.

The remaining pieces were a little undercooked but nonetheless presented some strong savory flavors. Seamus Sullivan's *Reunification, or Scenes from the Dear Leader's Annual Involuntary Film Festival* (Theme: the Great Divide) has an audacious plot: Kim il-Jong, North Korea's leader and international evil clown, has kidnapped the director Simon (Daniel Yoerges) so that he can film a propaganda film which will lead to reunification with the South. Simon's ex-wife, the actor Chloe (Carrie Monger) seeks him out in his North Korean prison and agrees to collaborate with him. Four years later they have a great film, and a plan to escape. Simon has his own dream of reunification, with Chloe, but at this point Chloe is not wild about the idea. The story sort of peters out, but in the meantime we have had some absolutely superb dancing (Lucy Bowen McCauley is the director and choreographer), especially by the remarkable Monger who, judging from her graceful leaps and the ease with which the athletic Yoerges handled her, must weigh about four pounds.

Sara Ilyse Jacobson *Alimentation* (Theme: Eating Your Words) is clever and funny - if you happen to read your program before watching it. Otherwise, it is a little hard to digest. Three young people (S. Lewis Feemster, Magdalene Vick and Cherita Williams) roll onto the stage, laughing and panting. Sobering up, they confess to feeling entrapped, imprisoned. They play charades to pass the time, and then bang on the wall and yell for help. All of a sudden they start swirling around helplessly and disappear stage right. I was buffaloed until I looked at my program: Feemster was playing corn dog, Vick was Lemonade, and Williams was Funnel Cake. *Oh! I Get It!* Feemster was particularly good in this; I will never look at a corn dog the same way again. Daniel Phoenix Singh directed and choreographed.

I haven't mentioned to this point that the redoubtable Jjana Valentiner served as Mistress of Ceremonies. Valentiner, wearing a delightfully ridiculous rubber blonde wig, reprised the role of the Utah good girl she played in her one-woman show, *Funeral Potatoes*. She even served some of those potatoes at intermission, making her, I suppose, an ironic chef. The potatoes were yummy. If ever you find yourself constrained in Utah for an extended period, I recommend that you get to know some extremely elderly people - the potatoes are that good.

Like the 24/7 Project itself, I have saved the best until last. I am not entirely sure I understood everything Randy Baker was telling us in *Cassandra Dances With the Devil* (Theme: the Price of Obsession) but there was no mistaking the meaning that director-choreographer Stephen Clapp got out of his performers. Cassandra (Stephanie Kara Jordon) tells the Devil (Meisha Bosma) about her greatest longing and regret: that she never got up the nerve to approach the one woman she loved instantly and unconditionally. She wanted to dance her whole life with that woman, but now she dances with the devil, and there is such a look of sweetness unfulfilled and unrealized on her face that you immediately understand that she is prepared to accept any substitute, however toxic. Jordon moves with the small, clumsy, awkward steps that only the most graceful performers (such as Charlie Chaplain or Dick Van Dyke) can accomplish convincingly. As for Bosma, she confirms what we already knew: ladies and gentlemen, the devil can dance!

Reviewed by Tim Treanor

<http://dctheatrescene.com/2009/06/30/source-project-247/>