

Separated at Birth(?) by Leslie Barcza

"Review by Leslie Barcza"

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Imagine two separate theatre projects, from two different writers, that mysteriously converge on the same subjects, using similar methods. If the two were coupled as an evening's entertainment one might be forgiven for supposing that they were contrived as a joint project, considering the ease with which one leads to the other.

Such is the experience of the innocent viewer at the current Theatre Passe Muraille (backspace) double bill, of two one-act shows, each a one-woman show, with other elements so similar that they became a natural, if accidental, set of twins, as though separated at birth.

First came "Joe: the Perfect Man," written and performed by Rochelle Elle. The style is almost improvisational, the premise that we're all auditioning for a production of Macbeth. Over the course of the audition we're treated to an off-kilter reading of Shakespeare that makes sense as an adaptation from a very oblique angle.

While the lines are often uproariously funny, there are also moments of great poignancy. I have never heard Shakespeare's phrase that ends "signifying nothing" land with such a strong and resounding thud, thereby enacting that nothingness.

Next came a completely different play, though it was performed on similar turf. "Unicorn Horns" by Melissa Major is another one-woman show that at times goes back and forth between a kind of stylized reality and an audition. But whereas Joe sits uproariously on the dividing line between the material and clownish farce, "Unicorn" is almost exactly the opposite, even as it staddles the same line.

Major inhabits an absurd world with complete pathos and conviction. Instead of the predicament of Gregor Samsa, who awakes in Kafka's novel Metamorphosis to discover that he's been transformed into a giant cockroach, this figure awakes to discover that her husband is flat: a life-size paper doll. She flips back and forth between the trauma of her discovery on the one hand, and various escapes into alternate realities on the other.

Directed by Aleksandar Lukac, one sees elements of his over-the-top sensibility in some of her choices, balanced by the trauma of this figure, waking up to discover that her husband is flat. At times she and her husband Alexander wear big unicorn horns on their heads, that double as comically exaggerated sexual organs. She screams that her husband is flat, and while we want to laugh, it's undercut by true pathos. Because of the conviction Major brings to her portrayal she defies us to laugh, even as we double over uncontrollably.

But in spite of the silliness, the genuine pathos of the portrayal keeps us firmly locked on the boundary between immensely flamboyant theatricality and a tender and intimate humanity. At the end, her tenderness towards the paper doll is so touching, one cannot help but be moved in spite of the absurdity. This is the play's near-tragic dimension, that we see and empathize with this display of emotion. Love is indeed absurd, but although we often laugh, we are also challenged by her devotion to the puppet.

Running until November 18th at Theatre Passe Muraille's Backspace, this contrasting but complementary pair is strongly recommended.