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nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · May 3, 2008

I will get right to the point: *Me* feels like the most important new American play of the season; anybody who is interested in the future of the theatre and/or the future of the world really needs to see it.

So now you're saying: isn't that just a bit hyperbolic? (And perhaps you're muttering, we know you love Kirk Wood Bromley's plays, Martin, but maybe you're getting carried away...) Maybe, but I don't think so:

Me marks a new and remarkable direction for Bromley—it's the most accessible and engaging work he's ever written, and it reflects an exciting collaboration with director Alec Duffy and composer John Gideon. So, I stand by my first paragraph. Do not miss *Me*.

Now, when I recorded [this podcast](#) with Bromley and Gideon, before I'd seen the show, the creators were trying to decide how to categorize their work. It has a lot of songs, and almost non-stop underscoring that's performed live, mostly by Gideon (on piano, guitar, percussion, and occasionally other instruments). So is *Me* a musical? Eventually Bromley and Gideon said, perhaps with tongue in cheek, that it would be MY job as reviewer to decide. So I hereby make my call: *Me* is a happening—the kind of immersive, involving theatre event that we hear about from the '60s but almost never experience nowadays. It's not interactive—our job in the audience is to sit and listen and engage and enjoy. But the entire Ohio Theater space, lobby and all, has been transformed in such a way that every inch of the space is part of the show; I hate to use the word installation because it sounds too fancy, but that's essentially what designer Jane Stein has created. It's a museum tour through Bromley's life and career, filled with personal photos and artifacts from past Inverse Theater productions.

OPENED

May 3, 2008

CLOSED

May 24, 2008

AUTHOR

Kirk Wood Bromley

MUSIC

John Gideon

DIRECTOR

Alec Duffy

PRODUCING

COMPANY

Inverse Theater
Company

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The reason for this somewhat brazen (if neatly ingenuous) display of ego becomes clear soon enough; but not before we've witnessed a pre-show in which several nearly-identically dressed actors schmooze audience members, each announcing that he or she is Kirk Bromley the playwright, and then a self-referential prologue that feels as much like C.J. Hopkins as it does Kirk Wood Bromley in which a dozen actors playing "Me" (i.e., Bromley) debate the meta-ontological-whatever-ness of what it means to be Me or "Me" or facets of "Me" (or, I suppose, "facets" of Me).

Bromley's gift for thrilling his audience with hyperactive theatrical poetry are on display here as in all his work. A pair of narratives begin to emerge simultaneously and perhaps unexpectedly, and then an immense and engulfing purposefulness kicks in. The stories of *Me* are, first, a young man who we presume is the playwright or at least somebody like or a stand-in for the playwright, who is coping with his battling parents who don't get him; and, second, a tale of a Chinese man and woman who lose their daughter, their son, and their love for one another in a series of bizarre and tragic circumstances. This latter plot is inspired by the legend of the Yangtze River Dolphin, which is recounted in a fascinating note in the program.

And the playwright character—"Me"—keeps insisting that he's a fish. A "chosen fish."

All of these divergent ideas are brought together, in tandem with an important fact about the Yangtze River Dolphin, which is that it has become extinct, solely through environmental damage wrought by humankind. Early in the play, the actors set it all up for us:

ME 13: I'd say that I was dying, save the hook
 In my gut was lifting me to stringless
 Eternity.

ME 1: I had refound my race.

ME 2: Yet only I among the dead could speak.

ME 3: Life is dying, and we don't know what to do.

ME 4: So we act.

ME 5: But life just keeps on dying
 And we don't know what to do.

ME 6: So we act
 Some more, but the more we act, the less
 we know

What to do.

ME 7: So life just keeps on dying.

By the end of *Me*, the need for all of us to literally become actors (i.e., to *act*: to do *something*) becomes essential and perhaps even ecstatic; the need for a playwright to discard all that came before and move audiences toward action and away from passivity and extinction is proved. And it happens to all of us, extraordinarily and transformatively, in this reconfigured

beloved downtown theatre: something special shared among strangers that just maybe will actually transform us.

I mentioned earlier that *Me* is a great collaboration; now is the time to note the brilliance of Gideon's score (and performance of it) and of Duffy's splendidly physical realization of Bromley's text. A dozen actors perform the piece: Arthur Aulisi, Drew Cortese, Sarah Engelke, Brenda Withers, and Marshall York take the key roles in the Chinese section of the show, while Bob Laine, Annie Scott, Paula Wilson, and Josh Hartung carry the contemporary narrative. The other ensemble members—Lora Chio, Dan Renkin, and Erwin Thomas—play various roles as needed. Everyone's work here, which takes in movement and singing in many styles, is excellent.

Jill Guidera's choreography is always appropriate. Other design elements are provided by Jeff Nash (lighting) and Karen Flood (costumes).

Let me end this where I started it, by reiterating that *Me* excited me more than any new play I've seen in 2008 and perhaps in 2007. At least at the moment, Bromley *is* the chosen fish, and I urge you to choose him and his dense, layered, complicated, funny, sad, touching, and finally very simple play.

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