



THEATER REVIEW | 'FIVE IN THE MORNING'

Disembodied Voices and Names That Go Unspoken



Karl Allen

"Five in the Morning" by Rotozaza, a British theater company making its American debut, at P.S. 122.

By JASON ZINOMAN Published: April 7, 2007

Standing in front of a blank slate of white walls, three shivering swimmers, red-faced and half-smiling in tight suits, await their orders from a series of chillingly calm disembodied voices. "Show your thoughts!" "Bite your lip!" "Die!" Like obedient children, they do as they are told.

Welcome to Aquaworld, a theme park where the temperature is always perfect and the beaches have no sand. You may think you've seen this place before in science fiction films or dystopian short stories by George Saunders, but don't be too sure. All is not what it seems in "Five in the Morning," a cerebral new brainteaser by the innovative London theater company Rotozaza that keeps you guessing throughout its taut, suspenseful 70 minutes. Are those scripted actors, or unrehearsed guests? Is Aquaworld a dream, or a voyage through a cracked subconscious? Are the swimmers merely puppets — and, if so, who pulls the strings?

In the last few years, Rotozaza, which is making its American debut at P.S. 122, has earned notice in alternative theater circles with an experimental style that employs unscripted performers willing to follow instructions. A similar tactic was employed in last year's puzzle play "An Oak Tree," an English import, by Tim Crouch, analyzing issues of free will and power, but with less depth.

Staged by Ant Hampton with the subtlety and sure-handedness of a seasoned magician, the play — written by Mr. Hampton, Silvia Mercuriali, Greg McLaren and Melanie Wilson — begins like a simple game of Simon Says ("Open your eyes," "Touch her") before a slight story starts to emerge. A surprisingly sweet romance develops between a man (Mr. McLaren) and the taller woman (Ms. Wilson). (No

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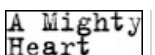
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character names are given.) “Ask him if you can climb into his arms,” a voice instructs her. And she does. While everything seems rigidly controlled, moments of spontaneity — a smile, a roll of the eyes — occasionally break through, creating an almost transgressive tension that is oddly exciting.

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What saves “Five in the Morning” from being an abstract exercise is that it’s rooted in these characters — trapped, struggling neurotics brought to life with tenderness. The face of the pixieish Ms. Mercuriali, who plays the smaller woman, is a mask of anxiety. She stares into the audience yearningly, but it’s unclear if she can really see us. As the play progresses, the artifice of the theater becomes increasingly clear. Even the audience is occasionally drowned out by a laugh track.

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At its core, the play is about how we construct our own personas, piecing together a narrative that we play in our own minds. Explaining more would give away some of the surprises, which are essential to the delight of the show. As with a great suspense film, watching this unusually daring show provides the gradual recognition of being manipulated — and enjoying every second of it.

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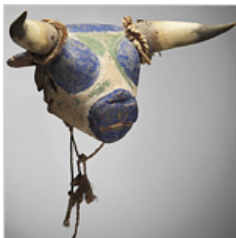
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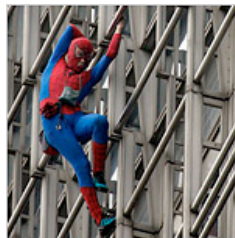


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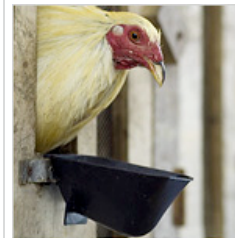


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