

February 18, 2012

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“All in the Timing” Widens the World

February 18, 2012 By [Mark Dewey](#)

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Christopher Saunders teaches Emily Hyland to speak Unamunda.

I’m not a big fan of conceptual theater because it tends to underplay the basic components of human experience, and I like human experience better than abstract ideas, so before setting out to watch Run Rabbit Run Dinner Theater perform a suite of skits by David Ives, whose work leans well to the left of conventionality, I reminded myself that it takes all kinds of plays to make the world, just like it takes all kinds of people, and that if I closed my mind to plays and people I didn’t expect to like, then I was doomed to live in a narrow world without surprises. I don’t want to live like that.

Driving the dark, winding roads between my house and Grandale Farm, where Run Rabbit Run stages many of its shows, felt like searching the back country for an off-the-grid theater hidden in somebody’s barn. That was just what I needed. When I found it, a doorman admitted me into a secret world of light and large wine glasses, where noscenti gathered to laugh and drink and watch young actors hone their craft. Would the show that everyone was gossiping about go over the line? Everybody seemed to hope it would.

The first skit, “The Universal Language,” would be a conventional girl-meets-boy story if it weren’t delivered primarily in gibberish. What happens is that Dawn decides to learn Unamunda, which is advertised as the universal language by a charlatan who hopes to sell lessons to dolts or desperate people like Dawn, who is desperately lonely because she stutters when she speaks English and thus doesn’t talk to people much. The Unamunda salesman, played by veteran local actor Christopher Saunders, speaks a mash-up of German, Italian, Spanish, French, and Nonsense with a natural fluency that makes you wonder if his gibberish actually makes sense, at least to him. For the first few minutes of the skit, his lines are little more than strings of meaningless syllables, yet he manages to give them the inflection of logical statements. Learning those lines must be like learning choreography that uses sound instead of motion—an impressive technical feat.

Emily Hyland makes her Run Rabbit Run debut as Dawn, the lonely woman whose predicament and reaction to the con game give the skit its humanity. The intersecting geometries of her square face, her round eyes, and the spiraling pile of hair on top of her head make it hard to look away from her, and when she begins to decipher the gibberish Saunders is speaking and respond in kind, it’s no surprise that he falls for her. How can he resist Dawn’s assertion that language is the opposite of loneliness, or that Unamunda gives the two of them the chance to rename everything, like Adam and Eve working with the benefit of hindsight? As the skit progresses, the gibberish they speak becomes easier to understand, and if you have a weakness for idealistic visions, you start to think the world might truly be improved if all of us could understand each other.



Erica Miller dings Garrett Milich in "Sure Thing."

The skit called “Sure Thing” is another mating scenario with a utopian premise: what if there were a mechanism for stopping derailed conversations and rewinding them to the point where they went wrong so you could start them over, again and again, until they went where you wanted them to go? In this skit, that mechanism is a bell. Betty is sitting alone in a coffee shop, reading *The Sound and The Fury*, when Bill comes in and attempts to pick her up. “Excuse me,” he says, pointing to the empty chair at her table, “is this seat taken?”

“Yes,” she says, “it is.” That’s not the answer that he hoped for, so he rings the bell and starts again. For fifteen minutes they move forward and backward by degrees, false step by false step, one of them ringing the bell every fifteen seconds or so, until they finally figure out which questions and answers will make them like each other well enough to go to the movies together.

The primary pleasures at work in this skit are indulging the do-over fantasy that most of us harbor and watching Garrett Milich and Erica Miller run through this exercise at lightning speed, breaking thought and instantly assuming new attitudinal positions, many of which require a completely different facial expression or tone of voice, three or four or five times every minute. It’s the sort of quick-cutting that has a comic effect when you see it on film, but watching Milich and Miller do it live is rather awe inspiring. Changing thought that fast and that often is a prodigious technical feat.

The best part of the other two skits is the way the actors work their faces. In “The Philadelphia,” Milich somehow moves his mouth over to a spot under his left ear and gets it to stay there, creating the impression of a man who engages the world with one side of his face while simultaneously taking its measure with the other. That impression and the accent he adopts, an inflection suggesting that he’s inseparable from some unknown place, tell us more about him than the lines he delivers do. The premise of this skit is that people sometimes fall into metaphysical funks that change reality in ways that are supposed to remind us of certain cities. In this case, Mark (played by Ben Huntington) has fallen into ‘a Philadelphia,’ where “no matter what you ask for, you can’t get it,” as Al (Milich), the greasy-spoon philosopher, explains.



Amy Blair teases Christopher Saunders about the axe in his head.

“Variations on the Death of Trotsky” offers two complementary pleasures. The first is watching Christopher Saunders, in a gray wig with a climbing axe embedded in it, drop dead on the table again and again without ever allowing his face to register anything but absolute certainty about his power to understand and control any situation, including his own death. The other is watching Amy Blair play Mrs. Trotsky. Somehow Blair’s face tells you that she’s seen it all before, and she has her doubts about it, no matter what it is. At the beginning of the skit, with that look on her face, she shows her husband an encyclopedia entry that says he died when a Mexican communist smashed a climbing axe into his head on the day before she shows him the entry. He disputes that piece of historical fact several times with several different arguments, each of which culminates in his dropping dead on the table. With each of those variations, Blair detaches herself from the scene a little further, so that by the end she’s looking at her ridiculous husband from more or less the same perspective we are. It’s as if she has stopped being a character in the play and become a member of the audience who has agreed to read the lines of Trotsky’s wife, so he can continue his ludicrous arguments against reality. And she communicates that change entirely with the look on her face.

In the end I was surprised by the humanity of Ives’s work. He poses questions people actually think about, and his characters struggle with desires, weaknesses, and hopes that really matter. Director Meredith McMath has a talent for helping young actors discover and develop those human elements in ways that make you laugh and think at the same time, and that’s the kind of pleasure everyone should know about.

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About Mark Dewey

Mark Dewey teaches English at The Potomac School and writes about life near the Shenandoah River. He loves mountain streams, his wife, his children, winter, and the Camino de Santiago.

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"All in the Timing," Run Rabbit Run Dinner Theater

February 10, 2012 7:00 pm

"Earth and Sky"

February 10, 2012 8:00 pm

"Black History Month Featuring James Leva & Cheick Hamala Diabate"

February 18, 2012 8:00 pm

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