

ACTORS' ABILITIES MAKE ABSTRACT CONCRETE IN 'CABIN PRESSURE'

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You deserve applause, for you are the underrated, misunderstood, odd and endlessly fascinating subject of Cabin Pressure, which opened last night to a standing ovation at the Wexner Center for the Arts.

Followers of Anne Bogart's SITI company are familiar with the troupe's blazing sense of theatricality and mesmerizing physicality. But Cabin Pressure achieves something more than Bogart's The Medium or Alice's Adventures -- or almost anything else that the center has presented in its 10-year history.

Here is a brilliant, beautiful, witty, probing example of that rare form: the essay as live theater.

Sharper and smoother than the acclaimed world premiere this past spring at Actors Theatre of Louisville's Humana Festival, Cabin Pressure launches its first national tour with a landmark Wexner production that is one of the season's most challenging and rewarding shows.

The audience is the subject of this colorful kaleidoscope of mime, monologue, dance, dreamlike images and quotes from the journals of a bemused Louisville audience.

Ellen Lauren, Kelly Maurer, Barney O'Hanlon, Stephen Webber and Will Bond are the expert chameleons who play actors onstage and audience members squirming offstage.

The director, the actors and other SITI members also weave in vivid excerpts or quotes from virtually every type of Western theater -- including bewigged Restoration comedy, sentimental Victorian melodrama, lurid murder mystery, romantic comedy, modern psychodrama and a Laurie Anderson spectacle.

Opening with a Noel Coward cycle that finds zany comedy in repetition, the actors return to Coward

much later from a fresh perspective: that surprisingly sacred space backstage where actors prepare themselves to enter a Zenlike meditative state just before and during a show.

Bond, who played Marshall McLuhan in The Medium, employs his lanky form and raised eyebrows to add satiric accent to Private Lives and Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? The rest of the ensemble displays similar precision and possibly even greater comic and dramatic range.

Perhaps only this intensely imaginative, collaborative troupe could evoke so many styles and tones and scenes so effectively in such a short time. At 90 minutes without intermission, Cabin Pressure is a true millennial work as innovative and allusive as an Angels in America.

Who knew that stuffy academic discourse about acting and the stage could be translated into such seamless, revelatory entertainment? Cabin Pressure is an eclectic performance piece that almost rehabilitates the reputation of deconstructionism.

If that sounds abstract, the genius of Bogart's troupe is its ability to make the abstract concrete, visually stunning and thought-provoking. The finale is a hilarious mirroring sequence in which the actors become the seated audience, shifting from farcical confusion or nervous irritation to slap-happy enthusiasm.

No one who loves theater or works in theater can afford to miss this landmark work. If you can get tickets before Pressure sells out, see it to appreciate your crucial role.

Will you like it? Will you laugh? Will you learn anything? And who is watching whom? SITI asks the questions; it's up to you to answer.