

THEATER REVIEW | 'WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE'

Long, jumbled intro kills interest in payoff

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

Anxiety. Anger. Fear. Shame. Envy. Lust. Embarrassment. Overall, an embarrassment of colliding but disconnected emotions.

A confrontation, a seduction, a deception, a transaction and other tantalizingly brief vignettes in a meditation of mind over matter.

Fragments of card-playing, beer-drinking, fighting, love-making, singing and dancing that initially add up to little more than mental masturbation.

If you feel frustrated and a little lost reading this far into this review, then you pretty much know how it feels to experience the overlong first half of *Who Do You Think You Are*.

SITI Company's experimental play, which opened last night at the Wexner Performance Space, tests the patience with a collage of repetitive movements, words and brief encounters that attempt to underscore the implications of brain science for human understanding and interactions.

If you didn't already know the ostensible subject in advance, you might not guess it until about 45 minutes into the 80-minute one-act, when the focus shifts to an explicit essay-performance piece. At that point, many might breathe a sigh of relief, because the rest of the show becomes more interesting and entertaining.

But that first 45 minutes is a brain-numbing endurance test that makes its minimal points so obviously that it really ought to be cut back into a 15- to 20-minute introductory collage.

Especially after the dazzling dramatic intensity and coherence of *Radio Macbeth*, a SITI world premiere that memorably marked their last visit to the Wexner Center in 2007, director Anne Bogart and her talented team have raised expectations beyond what their latest show in its present form can deliver.

One can understand why Bogart's troupe wanted to offer ample metaphoric tidbits of emotional meat at the start before switching gears too soon into something that easily might fall into didactic explanations or the dreaded precincts of "educational" theater.

Yet, the artificiality of the staging - which often goes in circles over a floor painted in black-and-white concentric circles - tends to defeat

WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE

- The Wexner Center for the Arts will present *Who Do You Think You Are* at 8 p.m. today through Friday, 2 and 8 p.m. Saturday and 2 p.m. Sunday at the Wexner Center Performance Space, 1871 North High St. Tickets cost \$24, \$20 for members and BalletMet subscribers, and \$10 for students. Call 614-2923535 or visit www.wexarts.org.

THEATER TALK

- For more news and reviews of the Wexner Center and other central Ohio theater, visit Michael Grossberg's Theater Talk blog

and undercut any intended drama. Plus, there's no need to rub it in, SITI, for keep in mind that the Wexner audience is a brainy and savvy crowd.

at
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Akiko Aizawa, J. Ed Araiza, Will Bond, Leon Ingulsrud, Ellen Lauren and Barney O'Hanlon play emblematic roles with crisp and chameleonic precision to little avail under Bogart's typically stylized direction.

Yet, aside from a few amusing moments of recognizably bad behavior, the many vignettes and characters are chopped into such a word- and movement salad that no character and no scene has a chance to develop into anything truly emotionally satisfying. (And isn't emotion what our brains crave?)

Admittedly, that does appear to be part of the point and theme: Who do they think they are, anyway? Us, of course. Humanity, that is, often at our worst.

At times, the early cascade of forgettable characters evokes a world of dislikable people much like Seinfeld, but without the jokes. Too often, that makes the problematic piece come across as a proverbial "show about nothing," a la Seinfeld, at least until all its cards finally are played and placed on the long white table that the actors keep moving around between vignettes.

To their credit, Bogart and her enthusiastic performers have taken to heart the implications of recent discoveries about "mirror" neurons for the prospects of greater self-consciousness somehow freeing us from bad behavior, (Too bad that really doesn't work, because Freud and others tried it and failed: If transformation could be sparked merely through insight, then we'd all be angelic supermen.)

Brilliantly illuminated under a chandelier-style sculpture of jagged fluorescent light tubes that flash in alternating sequence like the brain's neurons, the SITI production becomes a show about something illuminating only when it finally reaches its belated emotional center with a sense of wonder, cautious hope and social celebration.

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