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Theatre Review: Ann Hamilton and SITI Company's the theater is a blank page Dazzles

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Ann Hamilton and Anne Bogart have sold out performances of the theatre is a blank page, this weekend at the Wexner Center. Photo courtesy Katie Spengler.

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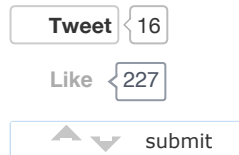
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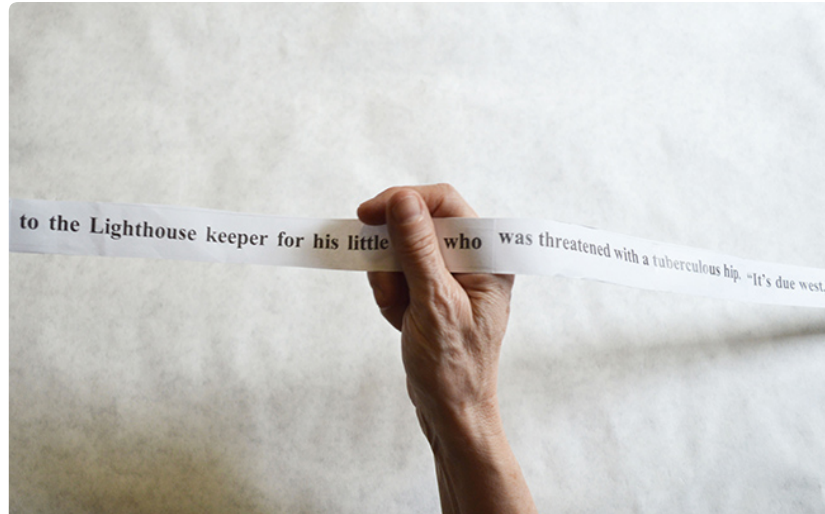
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Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* was published in 1927, an era still haunted by World War I, and is a modernist landmark as well as a novel that had a deep impact on this critic as a child. *the theater is a blank page*, the new collaborative work by SITI Company and co-directed by SITI's founder Anne Bogart and primarily-visual artist (and OSU Professor) Ann Hamilton, explodes that text and creates one of the most moving theatrical experiences I've ever had.

I almost hesitate to write about this for fear of spoiling any of the surprises, so I'm going to be more vague than usual. From the moment the audience is ushered into the theater, a sense of emptiness and melancholy suffuses the environment, with rows of seats covered in beige tarps, the stage bare and far away. As things slowly come to life, it's clear that this work is concerned with the mechanics of theater – the stage lights, the raw wood and brick that would normally be covered up, the placement of a curtain. Sweeping up – trying to restore a condition of perhaps not pristine-ness but newness, of being ready – is a visual metaphor that occurs repeatedly throughout the work, gaining density and intensity.

Rena Chelouche Fogel sits at a desk and reads from the Woolf text, but not from a book; she uses what looks like a tickertape so the words ceaselessly flow on a strip, passing through her hands and only presenting the sentence in question. Fogel's warm voice flows

through this piece like a river, like a liquid spine, and it slips from foreground to background, as instrument of sensation, as referent, as guide. Her voice is a constant as everything shifts – even the grounding the audience is given is suspect, constantly moving under their feet. Throughout this the rest of the cast come on stage, face each other, move in deliberate ways, but do not “act out” the words.



theater is a blank page. Photo courtesy SITI Company.

The next section moves this warm unbalanced quality to something closer up, the audience in wooden folding chairs as the actors read pieces of the text that overlap or contrast with Fogel's “narration” (now from behind us and addressing an empty auditorium) and litter the floor with tiny pieces of paper, like a book that's gone through a shredder or confetti not thrown in the air. As this accumulates, strips of cloth come down and sentences or fragments are passed from one person to the next, winding their way through the audience, in a way that forces the audience to interact, but also subjects each audience member to the pace of those around them, to just let the words flow through their fingers.

This second section reinforces the importance of physical work, the accumulation of effort, what's left behind while you're doing what you think of as what you *do*. The focal point is Ellen Lauren, in a bravura turn, first addressing the audience like a minister or a teacher, one of four people doing the kind of monotonous-seeming task that lets your mind run while muttering, then slipping through the confetti barefoot to set up the group being subject to one another. It's the kind of physical performance that goes out from and deeper into the body simultaneously. This focus switches to Akiko Aizawa as she helps build, but then destroys, sipping through

the detritus in waves but in a purifying way, like a monk sweeping the mandala back to pure sand. The six-person cast alternately slips into the background and makes it so you can't look away. Voices overlap and fade, pieces of the set are pulled off, the audience is included in sly little asides but also in direct, physical instructions. Words crystallize into symbols, then the symbols are quicksilver and slip away.

That middle piece is shot-through with loss, but there's an undercurrent of deep sensual feeling, the silk and the closeness and the movement but also the time. Time is a vital piece of any art form, and the passing of time is a key component of *To the Lighthouse*. Bogart and Hamilton play with time in a way I've rarely seen before, long stretches of the same minor action over and over that shift into something else without the audience quite knowing where one thing ends and the other begins. The "interval" – even in intermission, things are happening, keeping with the "bones of the theatre" elements of the production - is a giant exhale.

The third section has a greater element of traditional stage magic, with the audience looking up at the same thing more often than not, and it's dazzling. It has the heart-pumping magic of a climax, but it doesn't sacrifice the pace that's been so important, and it doesn't achieve that excitement by pandering or spelling things out. The landscape that's been built up through shadows and glimpses and light, through words standing and words lying down, and threaded by time, comes into full focus without losing its mystery.

The technical elements of *the theater is a blank page* use simplicity and rough edges to muse on words and touch, starting with Ann Hamilton's stage design, which manages to be awe-inspiring, meditative, and playful by turns. Brian Scott's lighting and Darron West's sound are both rich and immersive. And of course Hamilton and Bogart's co-direction ties this all together with a unity of purpose, feeling like one deft hand.

the theater is a blank page is one of the most erotic things I've ever seen on a stage, but without any explicit button-pushing or pandering. A key component is the texture of words – the way they feel in someone's mouth, in someone's ear, on silk running through your hands, projected in what looks like typewriter script with all the tactile, rhythmic associations that come with that. The other side of that sensuality is time – this play moves so deliberately that the audience becomes conscious of the breath in its lungs, every shift or cough or creak becomes freighted, and the only way to experience this is to luxuriate in it like a warm bath. You have to let

it flow around you; you can't force or command it. No matter how well you know the source text, skipping ahead in your mind does no good – it removes you from the pace the play needs, and will eventually smash your brains out on the rocks. That slowness is beautiful and dangerous at the same time.

This piece is a tribute to life, a paeon to sensation fully experienced, a howl into the void, a sensual expression of a deep love of language, and a diamond-hard burst of light. I don't know what else I could ask. As we walked out into the night, a friend said, "I want to go *back* there."

the theatre is a blank page runs through April 26 with performances at 7:30pm Thursday through Saturday, noon on Saturday, and 2:00pm on Sunday. This is currently sold out. For additional information or any additional tickets released, visit wexarts.org (<http://wexarts.org>).

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Richard Sanford is a freelance contributor to Columbus Underground covering the city's vibrant theatre scene. You can find him seeking inspiration at a variety of bars, concert halls, performance spaces, museums and galleries.

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