

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Alter Ego Theatre: Citizen & The Object Lesson

Sylvie · Wednesday, September 16th, 2015

I came late in the run to *Citizen, An American Lyric* at the Fountain Theatre and early to the opening night of *The Object Lesson* at the Kirk Douglas, and while the vastly different properties each show offer commendable aspects of what theatre can do, both have certain limitations.

Citizen at the Fountain, based on Claudia Rankine's well-received collection of poetic vignettes, has enjoyed a great deal of praise. Stephen Sachs' stage adaptation of Rankine's work is careful, fast-moving and focused, and the acting by a group of six fine performers is consistently admirable. In illustrating our ongoing American struggle with racism, it presents many striking teachable moments while avoiding most of the preachable ones. The ensemble piece is more choreographed than directed by Shirley Jo Finney, which is absolutely appropriate for this type of material and distinguished in this case by its own searing subtlety.

So *Citizen* has its place in the theatre, that locale of endless possibilities, but its mission is not what theatre does best. Admirable is a word that applies here, because *Citizen* makes a statement most people would enthusiastically endorse. On the other hand, it retains — or assumes — a detachment that comes with most politically-tinged endeavors.

It makes us aware of our bad behavior and our unawareness — our unawareness of the myriad ways in which racism rears its nasty head in seemingly innocent statements. It points to how a close friend, early in your friendship, might call you, a black person, by the name of her housekeeper — or to a man telling his black colleague with some level of exasperation how he has been told to hire a person of color “when there are so many good writers out there.”



I-r, in *Citizen, An American Lyric*.

These are the moments that in Rankine's writing are extremely powerful. So what's my problem? Just that changing the medium also changes them. They feel diffused by being voiced aloud. We hear them, we understand them, we agree with them, we champion them, but we *feel* them less because of the double emphasis created by the act of putting them on stage. It's a subliminal difference, I know, but once spoken, their lacerations come closer to pronouncements, a call to arms rather than a privately experienced and deeply felt event.

Does it matter? It depends on the individual listener. Certainly the words as written are felt and forceful. It's the level of emphasis that changes them and there is no explaining that. You either feel it or you don't.

Top image: The cast of Citizen, An American Lyric, at The Fountain Theatre.

Photos by Ed Krieger

WHAT: Citizen, An American Lyric

WHERE: Fountain Theatre, 5060 Fountain Avenue, Los Angeles, CA 90029.

WHEN: Saturdays & Mondays, 8pm; Sundays 3 & 7pm. **Exceptions:** No show on Oct. 3; no 7pm performance Sept. 20. There will be two Friday, 8pm, performances Sept 25 & Oct. 2 only. Ends October 11.

HOW: Tickets?\$20-\$34.95, available at www.FountainTheatre.com?or 323.663.1525. *Pay-What-You-Can every Monday night.?*



?The West Coast premiere of *The Object Lesson?* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, created and performed by Geoff Sobelle under the direction of David Neumann,

The Object Lesson at the Kirk Douglas is a comic, cuddly, occasionally touching installation/performing art piece that is spotty and somewhat disjointed, jumping as it does from one subject or incident to another without much rationale or intent, and barely connecting the dots. It is entirely loopy, amusing in some scenes, while dragging its feet in others, especially at the slow beginning and at its terminal encounter with a bottomless box that goes on and on.

And on and on.

This general aimlessness makes this one-man free-style event directed by David Neumann, feel longer than it is (in real time about 100 minutes without an intermission). I never could decide what the precise object lesson of the title should be, other than the undirected wanderings of life itself and our human tendency to become hoarders along the way.

That last comment comes thanks to the monumental proportions of the installation as seen in the photo above — 3,000 cardboard boxes of all sizes, piled high and wide in the ample interior of the Douglas by designer Steven Dufala and randomly organized to work with other oddments and objects, including many lamps.

A great deal of labor was expended to make all this look improvised when in fact it was not, and the meandering result has its isolated moments. The man shaves, the man talks on the phone (a lot), the man is preoccupied by a singular traffic light, the man is searching for the hardest thing in the world to find: human contact... It is life, yes, but does it keep us adequately intrigued, let alone entertained?

Most notable is a tender-funny love scene at the show's center when our guy, the talented Geoff Sobelle, invites an ill-fated audience member to hold up a lighted chandelier for many minutes while he, Sobelle, uniquely wines and dines a new lady friend with a salad that he chops with the blades of the ice skates on his feet.



Audience members with Creator/Performer Geoff Sobelle (center) in *The Object Lesson* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

It's that kind of a show. Many other curious ideas float in and out of this unpredictable hour and a half, not doing much connecting with one another and perhaps making their elusive point precisely by not connecting. In the end, this absence of cohesion leaves the audience a bit high and dry and perhaps with a bit of an aching back. The "unconventional" seating for *The Object Lesson* consists mostly of sitting on those backless cardboard boxes, even if you do get to pick your very own.



Audience member and Creator/Performer Geoff Sobelle in *The Object Lesson* at the Kirk Douglas Theatre.

Photos by Craig Schwartz

The Object Lesson continues at the Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd. in Culver City through October 4. Tickets and other information are available at www.centertheatergroup.org or at 213.628.2772.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, September 16th, 2015 at 3:14 am and is filed under [Theatre](#), [Lifestyle](#)

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