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An Amazing Auditory Encounter on Broadway

David Sheward · Wednesday, October 5th, 2016

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What was that blowing in your ear? Did it send a chill up your spine? Was it a real whisper of air or just the sound of one? Simon McBurney and a brilliant crew of technicians provide such auditory thrills in *The Encounter*, that rare Broadway event—a solo show which opens minds rather than celebrates individual personalities or showcases a star's facility with accents and quick costume changes. Inspired by Petru Popescu's book, the piece ostensibly focuses on real-life *National Geographic* photographer Lorin McIntyre's 1969 mind-altering journey into the Amazon rain forest where he meets up with the primitive Mayoruna tribe or "Cat People." The Mayoruna are constantly on move, escaping from the civilizing forces of the white man. The photog's very perceptions of time and space bend and twist as he follows the tribe deeper into the forest. Their chief who seems to be able to communicate with McIntrye telepathically, relays that they are going back to their "beginning," a possible reference to death, in order to preserve their identity.

Simon McBurney in *The Encounter*.
Credit: Joan Marcus

This could have been a simple action-adventure tale with McIntyre as a Harrison Ford-type hero caught in a trap with suicidal maniacs and scheming for a daring rescue. But McBurney, who also directed the show, adds layers of meaning and dimension. He begins with deceptive casualness, strolling onto Michael Levine's sound-studio set while the house lights are still on and the audience is testing out the headphones found on their seats. In an almost off-hand manner, he introduces the concept of reality being a shared illusion. "We're all here on what we agree is a Saturday night at 8 p.m. in New York City," he says without even batting an eye and then launches into McIntrye's bizarre journey, employing Cheese Doodle bags, unstrung videotape, and other found material to create an immersive soundscape. The voices of academics, journalists, philosophers, and commentators dart in and out of the tale, along with occasional visits by McBurney's little girl asking her daddy for nocturnal drinks of water and stories as he reads the book which will become the play we are watching.

Gareth Fry and Pete Malkin's sound design envelops us completely as McBurney draws us in, aided by Paul Anderson's evocative lighting. We're watching a live podcast and the sounds create the mesmerizing environment. McIntyre begins to doubt his place in the universe when he loses all his possessions including his camera, clothes, and even his sense of identity as the tribe keeps moving and ritualistically burns everything they own.

As artistic director of the innovative British theater company Complicite, McBurney has

challenged our notion of what a play is and should be in such genre-shattering works as *Mnemonic* and *A Disappearing Number*. Here he forces us to question our reality as he breaks down the familiar conventions of theater, eventually transforming McIntyre into a wild beast trashing the set. The creator-performer daringly submerges himself into an alternate universe of sound and sensation, taking venturesome theatergoers on a wild ride.

Sept. 29—Jan. 8. John Golden Theatre, 252 W. 45th St., NYC. Tue, Thu, 7 pm; Wed, Fri—Sat, 8 pm; Wed, Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Running time: one hour, 50 mins. with no intermission. $59—$149. (212) 239-6200 or www.telecharge.com

This review has previously appeared on ArtsinNY.com and Theaterlife.com.

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