Cultural Daily

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Storytellers at the Signature: Annie Baker's The Antipodes

David Sheward · Wednesday, May 17th, 2017

Annie Baker continues to explore the complex web of human communities in her strange and unexpectedly affecting new play *The Antipodes* from Signature Theatre. Previously she has detailed the connections made in an amateur acting class (*Circle Mirror Transformation*), a summer snack stand (*The Aliens*), a crumbling neighborhood movie theater (*The Flick*), and a possibly haunted bed and breakfast (*John*). Here, the specimens under her microscope are a group of Hollywood writers developing a major project—either a blockbuster movie or a TV series involving a monster of some kind. As they tell each other stories in search of inspiration for their mass-media project, they form a circle of trust and companionship amidst a disintegrating world. The unpredictable auteur disappears, apocalyptic weather erupts, and the line between reality and fantasy blurs.

Josh Hamilton in *The Antipodes*
Credit: Joan Marcus

The action is deceptively simple as is Lila Neugebauer's invisible direction and the naturalistic acting of the brilliant nine-member company. As the audience enters the theater, they encounter Brian (deceptively nerdy Brian Miskell), an assistant tapping away at his laptop in Laura Jellinek's sterile set. After the staff of scribes enters, Sandy, the quixotic director-creator (hilariously laid-back Will Patton) encourages them to recount their first sexual encounter and they gradually spin stories of identity, loss and trauma. The receptionist Sarah (wonderfully daffy Nicole Rodenburg, costumed by Kaye Voyce in a series of spot-on trendy frocks delineating her character) takes lunch orders and is eventually drawn into the circle of storytellers with a fantastic fairy tale of her own. Hers is an amazing piece of writing from Baker in a series of shaggy-dog anecdotes, related initially to create the script. But as the world of the writers falls apart—the studio abandons them, they can't leave because of disastrous weather—they continue creating fiction to survive and they form a kind of *Lord of the Flies* mini-fiefdom with strange rituals.

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The cryptic title derives from a 17th century British comedy by Richard Brome featuring a London dandy who is deceived into believing he has traveled to the Antipodes, an imaginary parallel England where everything is the mirror image of the real thing. Baker's trapped fabricators theorize a similar reverse-world for their project. But it's really the playwright examining our need to create make-believe versions of ourselves to better understand our actual lives.

Josh Charles and Philip James Brannon in *The Antipodes*
Credit: Joan Marcus

The play ends on a bittersweet note as Eleanor (a touchingly understated Emily Cass McDonnell), the only female writer, reads the childish crayon scrawl-stories she composed as a four-year-old. It's a tender moment of nostalgia and innocence after an insightful journey tracking the creative process. In addition to those mentioned, Philip James Brannon expertly delivers a seemingly endless, weird creation-myth monologue, Danny Mastrogiorgio and Josh Charles evoke macho to perfection, Danny McCarthy gives appropriately ambivalent voice to the only writer who doubts the process, and Josh Hamilton vacillates convincingly as the new guy whose paycheck never arrives. Their voyage is a fascinating and gripping one.

April 23—June 11. Signature Theatre at the Pershing Square Signature Center, 480 W. 42nd St., NYC. Tue 7:30pm, Wed 2pm and 7:30pm, Thu-Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm and 8pm, Sun 2pm. Running time: 90 mins. with no intermission. (212) 244-7429. www.signaturetheatre.org.

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