

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Synesthesia – But Why?

Campbell Britton · Wednesday, May 23rd, 2012

Variety for its own sake is never a satisfying option in the theatre. Neither is a somewhat too cute and flimsy concept – beginning with the (secret) reading of a Chinese cookie fortune by the first of eight performers – that has nothing to say beyond the well-known fact that artists can influence each other. In spite of the best efforts of the performing artists involved, *Synesthesia* (currently at LA's Bootleg Theater) turns out to be something of an insipid and confused variety show. I left *Synesthesia* with same question I had when I entered – “why is this show being done?”

The title *Synesthesia* derives from a broad term that attempts to cover a number of cognitive phenomena wherein one sense perception can trigger a creative response in a different sense. The term is appropriated here to refer to how artistic creations from differing genres can inspire those that follow. The production's contrivance – billed as “Artistic Telephone across the Genres” – is based on the Surrealist diversion called “Exquisite Corpse” – better known to contemporary audiences as the children's game of “Telephone.” Why?

What is the point of this onstage “Telephone” game? A dancer/aerialist (Ruby Karen) reads a cookie's fortune in a videotaped interview preamble, and speaks of how she might go about interpreting its meaning. The important thing in performance, she tells us, is always about the “message.” We then see her (and her clown-clad colleague, Luca Cecchini) interpret the fortune in a ten minute acrobatic act. Whatever ‘message’ the following artist (spoken word performer Aldo Pisano) can take away from her performance must form the basis of his upcoming ten minute act. But first we see him speculating onscreen about his assignment. And so it goes, in belabored succession: video interview with the next artist preceding a reinterpretation of the former piece within his own genre (all the remaining featured artists are men). Why? Unfortunately, the show as a whole lacks any integrated message whatsoever.

And why does the production interfere with potential success in every way? The video introductions are too long, too unimaginatively presented in a PowerPoint slideshow (designed by Brandon Lopez), and tell us virtually nothing except that all of the artists feel intimidated by the show's challenge. The presentation fails even to integrate the fortune cookie concept into its visual design. Audience energy comes to a screeching halt when these interviews appear. Could we not have seen instantly that a particular artist is a singer/songwriter (John Bobek, Rocco Vitacco) or an actor/writer/singer/ASL signer (Michael Bonnabel) without the “talking heads”? Why are the artists' creations not allowed to speak for themselves, at least establishing an exciting pace and stimulating our curiosity?

The performers' work is further compromised by the sheer size of an un-ironed cloth-covered boxlike affair that serves as an ad hoc projector screen and takes up one-third of the stage space.

Our attention is directed even more to this dreadful box during a particularly low point in the performances featuring ugly abstract designs by lighting and projection designer Marc Rosenthal. And why did the production team not at least seek some sort of integration between the show's premise and design by modeling the 'projection screen' box on the shape of a Chinese take-out container? (Actor/chef Michael Dunn appears to have realized this obvious motif omission and incorporates it [out of desperation?] into the presentation of his culinary creation.)

With one notable exception, commedia dell'arte actor John Achorn, the performers also suffer from routinely dull, repetitive staging where a cookie cutter (instead of a fortune cookie) seems to have been the inspiration. (The conceit of the street musician performing for spare change was actually used twice – complete with coins being tossed and missing their mark!) But Achorn surmounts the banality of this production with his expertly rendered creation of an actor's frustrating 'split' between the commedia characters of Dottore and Pulcinella. Caught in the end between laughter and tears, comedy and tragedy, he manages a message of intellectual depth and soulful human resonance that eludes the others. His ten minutes on stage are worth the price of admission.

I am loathe to lay full responsibility for this show's failings at the feet of director Cate Caplin since I don't know how constrained she might have been by the bevy of young producers who may have thought the original execution of this off-off Broadway concept show should not be changed. But I do have something of an answer to "why is this show being done?" It became clear from a post-performance Q&A that the original NY piece was merely a showcase project for friends of the producers – performers from different artistic persuasions. That's all. No other reason given – theatrical "message" be damned. Why it's being done in LA is still an open question. Hmmm.

At the [Bootleg Theater](#), Mondays at 7:30pm until June 11, 2012 (tickets \$5 -\$10).

Image, from the production's IndieGoGo video, is of John Achorn's commedia troupe.

This entry was posted on Wednesday, May 23rd, 2012 at 4:33 pm and is filed under [Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [Comments \(RSS\)](#) feed. You can leave a response, or [trackback](#) from your own site.