

STAGES

## Sleeping Weazel premieres Charlotte Meehan's 'Real Realism'

By Joel Brown | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MAY 30, 2013



DAVID HIGGINS

From left: Veronica Wiseman, Andrew Tung, Alex Dhima, and Jennifer Welsh in Charlotte Meehan's "Real Realism."

SAVE

The characters are listed as A, B, C, D, and E, although they have names that pop up later. The time is "Now. Or any time. Some time." And the place: "Something makes you think you're in a room, but it's fleeting."

The characters, including a 10-year-old boy, are caught in a sort of cosmic treatment center, where they're meant to work on their issues. They talk to, at, and past each other, poetic and snarky and angry by turns. Non sequiturs and New Age platitudes tumble out all over ("You have to choose to be a happy camper"). Arguments eventually turn to physical violence, and someone pulls a gun.

This is Charlotte Meehan's "Real Realism," which gets a world-premiere production from [Sleeping Weazel](#) at the Factory Theatre through June 8. Linear

plot? Forget about it. Tumult and absurdity are at the heart of Meehan's vision, and it's not difficult to understand why.

As Meehan recounts, she married British filmmaker and theater artist David Hopkins in June 2001, three weeks after the birth of their daughter, Margot. They lived in Lower Manhattan, and on 9/11 they heard the planes crash into the towers. The hours and days that followed were traumatic, but especially for Hopkins, who as a young boy had survived his house being blown up in the German bombing of London. They decided to leave New York. Meehan got a job at Wheaton College, and they moved to Massachusetts in the summer of 2002.

A year later, Hopkins was diagnosed with colon cancer. He died in 2004.

"Real Realism" is actually the third part of a trilogy titled "The Problem With People." "I call these — and this is the last of them, I hope — my plays of the broken heart," says Meehan, who has since remarried and lives in Sharon. "There's a lot of sadness in all three of the plays. The people have lived through some really hard things in all of these plays."

"In this one, I really started to look at the ways that people aren't talking to each other," she says, "the subliminal subtext that's going on while someone's talking to you, the other conversation you're having with yourself. And instead of fighting that, I have people speaking that other conversation."

Hopkins founded Sleeping Weazel in England in 1998, directing one of Meehan's earlier plays and generally embracing edgy and experimental work. Meehan has reactivated the company over the last couple of years and is its artistic director.

She and Hopkins began the first play of the trilogy, "Sweet Disaster," together, using some of his film animations in a work that was in part a reaction to 9/11. She completed it after his death, and it premiered in Providence in 2008.

The second play in the trilogy, "27 Tips for Banishing the Blues," tackles depression, which Meehan has been diagnosed with, and the charlatanism of those who offer easy cures. That play has only been workshopped, and Meehan says she plans to premiere it with Sleeping Weazel next year. (She hopes to restage "Sweet Disaster" in 2015, completing the trilogy in reverse.)

Despite all the darkness, "27 Tips" is a comedy. Meehan and director Vanessa Gilbert say "Real Realism" earns laughter, too, at least sometimes.

"First off, I think the title's hilarious," says Gilbert. "The idea that someone's telling me they're going to actually do real realism — 'It's real!' — is like a big joke."

Meehan says the play looks at her characters "through a narcissistic lens, sort of through the unattractive lens of the id, things that we don't necessarily want other people to see. But that can be quite funny, or at least I think it's funny."

Gilbert calls Meehan's style not realism but a kind of modern expressionism with roots in Ionesco and Beckett, exploring the human condition. "People all want to be loved and accepted, and everyone grapples with loss," Gilbert says.

The "Real Realism" cast features Veronica Wiseman (A), James Barton (B), Alex Dhima (C), Jennifer Welsh (D), and Andrew Tung (E). You'd think the nonlinear nature of the play would make rehearsing more difficult, but Gilbert says they've found ways to replace the typical landmarks of plot and action, entrances and exits.

"We do break down the big action into units," Gilbert says. "I have one little piece that I call the existential pissing match. And we all know where that is in the script."

### The sound of musicals

The North Shore Music Theatre's 2013 season reads like musicals' greatest hits: "The Sound of Music" (June 11-23); "The Wizard of Oz" (July 16-28); "Cats" (Aug. 20-Sept. 1); "La Cage aux Folles," starring Charles Shaughnessy of "The Nanny" (Sept. 24-Oct. 6); and "Miss Saigon" (Nov. 5-17). The Beverly venue's annual production of "A Christmas Carol" will return Dec. 6-22, with David Coffee celebrating his 20th season as Scrooge. The Summer Fairy Tale Musical Series of one-hour productions, presented by Kaleidoscope Children's Theatre, begins June 28 with "Snow White." Concert performances kick off on Saturday with Starship, featuring Mickey Thomas. Tickets are on sale at 978-232-7200 and [www.nsmt.org](http://www.nsmt.org).

### Fiddlehead at the Strand

Fiddlehead Theatre Company will play its 2013-14 season as the resident company of the Strand Theatre in Dorchester. Coming to the stage there are "A Little Princess" (Nov. 21-Dec. 8) and Elton John and Tim Rice's "Aida" (April 24-May 11, 2014). Ticket information is at [www.fiddleheadtheatre.com](http://www.fiddleheadtheatre.com).

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