

‘Real Realism’ a bracing reality check

By Jeffrey Gantz | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JUNE 04, 2013



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Front: Veronica Wiseman, Alex Dhima (center), and Andrew Tung. Back: Jennifer Welsh and James Barton.

‘I was born in a shoebox. I’ll die in a shoebox.’ That’s B (James Barton) speaking, one of five (or perhaps six) characters in *Sleeping Weazel* artistic director Charlotte Meehan’s “Real Realism.” And the shoebox for this world-premiere production directed by Vanessa Gilbert is, appropriately, the Factory Theatre, that basement-level black box in the South End. How the characters get there is as much a mystery as how they’re going to leave — assuming they’re allowed to. The audience, after a claustrophobic, intermissionless 80 minutes, will be relieved to find the exit door works. Reality can be tough, and Meehan’s play lives up to its name.

Actually, we do see the characters enter the playing space: They come, one by one, through a door stage left. Before that, however, a video screen seems to show

them, in black and white, waiting outside while a voice intones admonitions like “Don’t be proud” and “Don’t be judgmental.” The space itself is defined by a big blue square on the floor, a smaller square of artificial grass inside that, and six plastic chairs. Blue and green define the characters’ costumes as well. The video screen shows a blue sky with clouds; at one point, we hear rain and D (Jennifer Welsh) puts up a blue-sky-with-clouds umbrella. But real grass and real sky are nowhere in sight.

The play begins in fits and starts. A (Veronica Wiseman) tells us, “I found a house listed for just under five. Short sale.” B muses, “Funny, but I’m suicidal again.” D is upbeat: “I’m a happy camper. You have to choose to be a happy camper.” E (Andrew Tung) is not: “I burned my hand yesterday, as if on purpose.” C (Alex Dhima), who it turns out is D’s son, bounces a ball, reads “National Geographic,” takes pictures with a disposable camera, and talks about string theory. The quintet barely seem to know one another. Mostly they talk about themselves, as if they were talking to a therapist.

Are they in therapy, then? Meehan drops a few hints. “My husband paid good money for me to be here,” A explains. A booming voice, accompanied by lights flashing in the panels around the door, announces, “Time’s up. Session’s over. Everyone go to bed.” They do sleep, some on the chairs, and then wake to the calls of house sparrows and a mourning dove and it starts all over. E does yoga poses and then melts down, screaming, “I want him back.” A confesses that he’s defrauded people. Punches are thrown; a green plastic gun is produced and shots are fired. Their real names emerge: Alice, Bill (but B prefers William), Charlie, Darla, Eddie.

So it would appear their session is just beginning. Then again, the voice tells Bill, “You know the rules. You’ve been here a long time.” It doesn’t seem that they’ll be leaving anytime soon. Perhaps, as in Bruce Jay Friedman’s “Steambath,” they’re dead and don’t know it. Perhaps, for Meehan, this is simply what it means to be alive.

Whatever they’re doing, the actors do it extremely well; they take to the dialogue as if they were making it up on the spot. “Real Realism” is the final installment of Meehan’s trilogy “The Problem With People,” whose first two parts, “Sweet Disaster” and “27 Tips for Banishing the Blues,” Sleeping Weazel promises to present here over the next two seasons. I look forward to the rest of this reality check.

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