



Women in Action: A New Wave Of Art, Theatre, Music And Performance

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Before the show I heard people whispering. A woman peered down through her bifocals at the program. "A play that starts out with a lecture? Not a good sign," she said. It was Sleeping Weazel's multi-genre festival, "**Women in Action: A New Wave of Art, Theatre, Music and Performance**," which ran at Factory Theatre, March 6-9.

One man looked like he had just come from a rugby game, knowing that if he didn't his relationship with his girlfriend would be in serious jeopardy. He put his arm around his companion and chuckled with good humor, "Lecture? It better be an interesting lecture."

She turned and confronted him with, "People need to understand the extent of gender inequality the theatre. I'm sure she'll explain that to us."

No such luck. The visual artist Alexia Stamatiou was given free rein to say anything she wanted, but said almost nothing about herself. In an age as exhibitionistic as ours, where we regularly tweet the most mundane details of our lives, this might have seemed mystifying. But it isn't like Stamatiou needs to puff herself up: Her work has shown in exhibitions around the world at places like Freight + Volume in New York and the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo. You can see some of her work online through Boston's LaMontagne Gallery.

One by one, Stamatiou projected a diverse montage of images onto a screen as she recited a list of words. What was the connection? Some of the images were instantly recognizable, some were obscure. Some words meant nothing to me, while on others I could write an essay. But what did it all mean?

Soon I noticed my heartbeat had slowed; it was beating in time to the rhythm of her voice. My mind wandered: *That image is from a movie I haven't seen it since I was a child. I saw it with my grandma. We watched it on TV and I played with the little wooden shoes she brought back from her trip to Holland. My God, I can smell my grandma's house...*

This lecture wasn't anything like the long strings of information I took notes on in college. Her chant was a song, a prayer, the element of drama that Aristotle called

music. And in the end it was a vibrant and powerful meditation. With absolutely no pretense, and without any complaint about her lot in life, Stamatiou made theatre. She was unmistakably sharing herself in an honest and vulnerable way, but the experience was completely subjective to each individual audience member.

Audiences want to connect to plays, but it can be difficult when you see something you don't know how to read. With theatre, as with food, we tend to gravitate toward the familiar. You don't know if you like a certain kind of food until you try it, and with some things, like wine, you may not understand what you're experiencing until you've talked about it with someone.

After the show, Ilana M. Brownstein filled that role, helping us to put the work we had seen into perspective. Brownstein is a dramaturg and director who works with numerous Boston organizations. (A dramaturg, if you're unfamiliar with the word, is a professional position within a theatre company that deals with the research and development of plays. A dramaturg works with actors, directors, designers and audiences to elucidated plays, often by putting them in a social and historical context.)

Brownstein, through her non-profit Playwrights' Commons, has a passion for supporting writers, "with a special focus on deepening the opportunities for artists who hope to put down professional roots in Boston and surrounding cities." And she has a personal goal to make New England a thriving center for new drama and fringe theatre.

In collaboration with Company One, Brownstein has helped develop the work of three dynamic women at various stages of their careers. (The will feature readings of these works and conversations with industry leaders, March 22-24. If you want to see the frontier of new theatre in and around Boston, this is the place to be.)

That night I also saw selections from Obehi Janice's solo show "Fufu & Oreos." Janice cites monologist Mike Daisey as one of her main inspirations. "I wrote him this adoring fan letter and offered to drive down to see him. But I realized most people don't appreciate a stalker as much as you'd think," she said.

In "Fufu & Oreos," Janice talked about her clinical depression and her worry that she isn't faithful enough, black enough or Nigerian enough. Charming, funny, and engaging, Janice was not at all like Mike Daisey. She was completely herself.

Adara Meyers, Managing Director of Sleeping Weazel, attempts to create some of the most interesting experimental theatre in New England. Using non-traditional spaces, new formats, collectives of live-music, puppetry, dance and video, her work is often multidisciplinary collaborations.

The director and actors contributed a lot to her piece, "Tryouts." This episodic and fractured narrative was full of angst and kinetic images of bodies in motion. Characters came into focus not so much through what was said as by the interpretation of the actor saying it. Miranda Reilly and Alexandra Danielle King's performances in particular stood out. Jacob Richman designed video backdrops that indicated a location through layer of images and subtle movement. At times these were like abstract art, but they always remained delicate and unobtrusive.

Meyers explained the piece as an examination of the pressure a young woman has to identify herself and become a success in the world. The conflict and the love/hate dynamic of the mother/daughter relationship was the most memorable aspect of the play.

So what is the state of women in the theatre? Amy Herzog is the hottest new voice off-Broadway right now and, according to Time Magazine, she will only make about \$7,000 from the hit production of "Belleville." She's thinking about going into feature films and television.

The biggest deterrent to women in the theatre is the state of the theatre itself. But locally, twelve new playwrights recently had the opportunity to have full productions of their work staged at Heart & Dagger's Annual Sex Fest, "Such Times"-- nine of the program's 15 short plays were by women. Moreover, with companies like Boston Playwrights' Theatre, Fresh Ink, and Argos Productions, Boston is working hard to keep new theatre alive.

Women in Action: A New Wave Of Art, Theatre, Music And Performance ran March 6-9, 2013 at Boston Playwrights' Theatre and The Factory Theatre.

The XX PlayLab will run March 22-24, 2013 at the Calderwood Pavilion at the Boston Center for the Arts, 527 Tremont Street.