

Other Stuff



Convergence Theatre

This is a small, inventive spunky theatre company in Toronto. The company is composed of wife and husband Julie Tepperman and Aaron Willis. She writes and often acts in the plays. He acts and directs them. Together they produce with style, grace, meticulous attention to detail and generosity of spirit. I was mightily impressed.

They often produce their shows at the Fringe Festival during July, when I'm always on vacation. So when they revived one of their recent shows when I was home. I jumped.

The shows are often site specific shows. One show took place in a car. *The Gladstone Variations* took place in and around The Gladstone Hotel, on Queen Street West in Toronto. The Gladstone used to be a seedy dump, the kind you walk past quickly. The area was unsavory with druggies, drunks and the sad people who should have been in the mental facility just a few blocks away. The Gladstone was home to many of them.

Then gentrification moved in. The hotel was renovated into a trendy spot for hip up and comers and wanna-be hipsters with lots of money. The seedier denizens of the neighbourhood were still around, but shuffled to the background and no longer a fixture at the Gladstone.

To give you an idea of the creativity of Tepperman and Willis, *The Gladstone Variations* are four inter-related plays, performed over two nights. The audience saw two shows each night. We followed a leader who in turn followed characters of the play. We were led up and downstairs, into hotel rooms and washrooms, pressed against corridor walls, and up and down fire escapes, all following characters who would reveal the secrets of the plays.

This evoked memories of the play, *Tamara* by John Krizanc (1981) which played first in Toronto, then in Los Angeles and New York. At that multi-character production, performed in a mansion, the audience followed a character or characters from scene to scene. There was no leader. You followed the character of your choice. Even if you followed the same character for the whole show, you really didn't get the whole picture, just the picture pertaining to that one character.

In *The Gladstone Variations* you follow all the characters of your play as they scurry from scene to scene, interacting here and there, and so we get the whole picture.

For the most part the audience chooses the plays they wish to watch each night. Because the plays are interre-

lated all the threads tie together by the end of the second night.

The plays in the first variation were: *The Tearful Bride* and *Requiem for a Hotel*. The plays in the second variation were: *The Card Trick* and *I Grow Old*.

Here are brief synopses:

The Tearful Bride (by Rick Roberts): A bellhop encounters a beautiful bride as she waits tearfully for her impending groom. A respected concierge narrates the story.

A Requiem for a Hotel (by Mike McPhaden): Classes collide when Rhonda, the hotel's unofficial Karaoke Queen, encounters a pair of Queen West scenesters. Rhonda was recently barred from the Melody Bar of the hotel and her weekly chance to take the stage. Rhonda finds her life--and possibly her mind--beginning to unravel. When she becomes a diversion for two guys on the prowl, all three must face the truth of Rhonda's place at the Gladstone.

The Card Trick (by Brendan Gall): A down-and-out-stranger is on the trail of a missing girl when a mysterious new lead brings him to the steps of the Gladstone Hotel. Getting inside is going to be tough because of the mean looking bellhop at the door. At one point the bell hop beats up the rummy. Staying out of trouble is going to be impossible for this guy. Before the day is done he'll match wits with a veritable rogues gallery, including that bitter bellhop, a squeegee kid with a heart of gold, a couple of smug scenesters, an enigmatic concierge, and a couple of shady characters. But in order to deal with them, he's going to have to grapple with his own unraveling psyche. Can he hang on long enough to find her again?

I Grow Old (by Julie Tepperman): On a Friday night in 1945 Harry Kraft went dancing at the Gladstone Hotel with members of his baseball team. An old and disheveled Harry returns 60 years later to rent his old room. He doesn't want to leave and locks himself in the room. Finally, a community social worker is called in to do a mental health assessment. As Harry nears the end of his life, he struggles to hold on to the last strands of his memory and finally face the ghosts from his past.

Strands from each story swirl around each other. And as we wonder why the bride is weeping and why did her dastardly fiancée stand her up, and why does that gum-

chewing baseball player have a horrible bloody wound on the side of his head, and why does that old guy seem haunted by a memory, and why is this silent little girl cowering in the corner of this deserted room, in which the walls are plastered with post-its, it all comes clear.

Because all the plays take place in the hotel it is not unusual for the audience of one play to walk past an audience watching a scene from another play. Coordinating the logistics must have been incredibly complex task.

In the case of *The Tearful Bride*, we wait patiently along the front wall of the hotel. A personable young man in a tuxedo introduces himself as our guide for the play. He is obviously a member of the wedding party. We follow him around the corner, passing an elderly lady dressed oddly in trainers, bright coloured socks, a skirt, a glittery sweat-shirt (I can't remember the phrase on the front), who is obviously a little confused and loopy, and who looks strangely familiar. We round a corner into a laneway at the back of the hotel where we see a man in a suit lying face down on the ground. Oy.

Eventually he gets up and brushes himself off. He is the concierge. He has the *chef d'or*, the highest honour bestowed on a concierge. I guess that means he can get you tickets to sold-out Madonna concerts.

We follow him up the fire escape, where I notice a garment bag carefully laid out on the landing. (Later, on the way down the fire escape, the bag won't be there. At one point we will pass a large square of bloody cardboard at the side of the building. Later that cardboard will be spread out on the ground.)

The various stories meld, mix and tangle up with each other. I can't remember which scene belonged to which play, and I'm not sure in the telling it's important. What is important is the swirl of activity and the style in which it all unfolds. I am left with lots of memorable impressions. For example, while the group is waiting outside the hotel for a play to begin, the bell hop, a dangerous looking man in an overly tight uniform, comes out and tells a seemingly drunk rummy to move on. The rummy is not clean-shaven, wears a dirty, torn trench coat. His eyes are haunted and ringed with dark circles. He too, looks familiar.

The old lady used to sing karaoke at the hotel but has fallen on bad times. She needs money. She asks a young man for money and he says he will help her out, and then disappears. We crowd around her as she tries to get funds from the ATM machine in the lobby. I look over her shoulder as she puts the card in and enters the numbers. I see the message clearly: insufficient funds in her account. She asks where the guy went who said he would lend her money. The lady looks imploringly at me for help. I quietly point up the stairs without saying a word. She thanks me and we follow.

At another point we follow the rummy up the stairs and

all of us crowd into a large washroom. I am behind him. He is in pain. He is panting. He stands in front of the sink. He looks in the mirror. He takes a bottle of whiskey out of his pocket, lifts up his shirt to reveal a terrible wound. (I don't see it, but from the reaction around me, I gather it is pretty terrible.) He pours the whiskey on it to disinfect it and crumples to the ground in pain. Outside the washroom there is yelling and running from another of the plays. After a while, when the outside scene is cleared, we get up and leave with the recovered man.

As best as I can recall, he is haunted because he bet his daughter in a card game and lost. The little girl in the room with post-its, is his daughter.

The bride is stood up at the altar because her fiancé has been killed in a car accident. The fiancé turns out to be the baseball player with the hideous bloody wound at the side of his head. He was sitting in the front seat and in the crash went flying through the windshield and died. Before the crash he traded places with a friend who moved from the front seat to the backseat. That friend is the haunted man who seems befuddled and is actually grief stricken. He was first in love with the bride, but she loved the baseball player.

The bellhop is a dangerous Dov Mickelson. The rummy is a believable Richard McMillan. The concierge in the first play is Richard Greenblatt: dapper, officious, matter-of-fact with a touch of danger. If I didn't know the loopy lady to be Janet Amos, a stalwart of the early days of Canadian theatre in Toronto, I would have seen her only as a sad woman who looked befuddled and talked to herself. A good fit for this neighbourhood.

I loved the novelty of the event. I loved how you can watch one thing while being aware of something else in the corner of your eye. You walk past a scene from another play complete with attentive audience one night, and find yourself among the audience for that scene the following night. You see a familiar face in an unusual setting and aware realize a good actor is making himself blend into his seedy surroundings. You are watching these skilled actors in the light of every day, not on a stage with lights. You are not separated from the play, or protected from the action, by the usual fourth wall.

I loved the meticulous care taken by Aaron Willis and Julie Tepperman in commissioning these plays and managing the evening. The logistics alone were impressive. I loved that the ATM showed insufficient funds, for example. I loved looking both harder and peripherally and realizing that things aren't what they seem. Anything may be true, everything can be theatre and all of it can be entertaining and gripping.

I loved meeting in the laneway at the end of the plays, along with the audiences of the other three plays, and applauding the casts of the four plays as they emerged from

the rear of the hotel door and filed along the wall. Teperman and Willis came out last, and they all took their bows together.

I loved the invention, thought, daring, hard work and sheer audacity. These two gracious artists have developed a company that produces some of the most exciting theatre in years. More please.

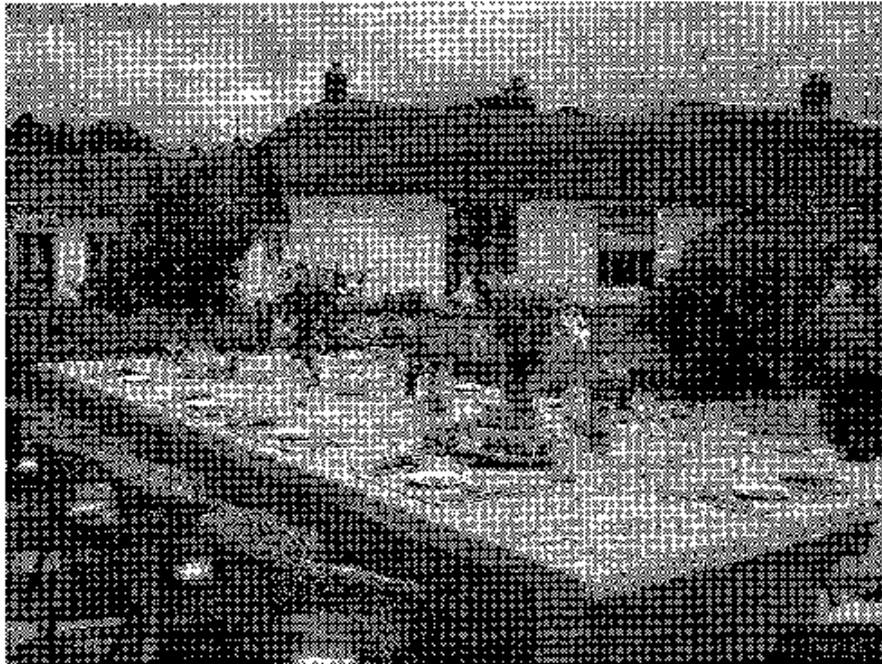
Devon

After the adventure of France, Bob and I drove to Devon (in Southwest England) to spend a long weekend with our friends Liz Robertson—actress, singer, dancer, charity organizer extraordinaire—her husband Patrick Deuchar—administrator, chef, visionary, host par excellence—and their gorgeous, talented teenaged daughter Briony.

I met Liz in 1977 when she came to Toronto from England with a tour of *Side By Side By Sandheim*. The company stage manager of that show was a young man named Bob West. We have been fast friends ever since. We keep in touch during the year. And I always see them when I'm in London. I think I

first saw Liz a few years before in London in *A Little Night Music* starring Jean Simmons. Liz played one of the Lieder Singers.

Liz and Patrick bought the property in Devon years ago. It came with a main house, a run down barn, a building that used to be a slaughter house and other buildings in a state of dilapidation. The property is vast. It borders on a stream.



Liz's Folly

Over the years Liz and Patrick, with the help of local artisans, have painstakingly restored the property and the buildings. Part of the original house is 500 years old. The floors creak. I love that. The barn has been renovated and connected to the main house and is beautiful. The wood used is local and I believe there were no nails used in the renovation. The artist who did the work used old fashioned techniques to renovate it, so sections of wood fit snugly into other sections of wood. The ceilings are high. Light pours in from many windows.

I stayed in the bedroom I had the last time. The bed is like being enveloped in pure luxury. If the pillows won't smother you, the duvet will. Part of the ceiling tilts so you have to watch your head. The bathroom is so long and wide you could bowl in there. I chose however to do the regular stuff you would do

in a bathroom.

On the grounds are 14? different kinds of apple trees—I think that's what Patrick told me. The apples are picked and used by Patrick and Liz, but the majority I believe are distributed to the locals in the area. They use many of the apples for mash and ci-

der. There is a cherry tree that Patrick aggressively pruned this year and so it didn't bear fruit. There is a walnut tree that is a favourite of the local squirrels. At the back of the property is a kitchen garden full of lettuces, broad beans, runner beans, peas, potatoes, tomatoes, leeks, zucchini and many more veggies I'm sure I forgot, and of course all manner of