The Upstairs Concierge by Kristoffer Diaz (review)

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Diana Slickman (Carol) and Colm O'Reilly (Host/Hostess) in Song about Himself."

disembodied one, *YouSpake*, and in the process highlighted theatre's virtuality, its capacity to couple here and now with nowhere and never. The place had no identifying features, the muted costumes looked like mumbling, and composer Mark Messing's spare soundscape gave the calculated impression of formlessness. The actors made no eye contact with one another until the final scene. Together, these choices revealed how theatre, so often defined by presence, can also be like the Weed, "a thing of loss and changing." Like Whitman, who said "I help myself to material and immaterial," the performance flouted the distinction: we were inches from Carol's panting breath and heard the plaintive strains of her voice, and yet she remained lost and remote.

A third place where Carol might have been when she said "I am here" is in text, or in poetry. YouSpake is made of text: the play makes audible the voices one hears when reading a screen. Many social networks are made of words, but this one, like so much theatre played on a bare stage, is made of poetry. At times the play suggests that lyrical noodling is the shibboleth of humanity, the proof of our privileged capacity for artistic creation and nimble cognition. Whitman's song loosed Carol's voice, Tod finds that singing helps to keep him from stammering, and the sui generis song of Maher's poetry is less a harbinger of language's impending corruption than it is a prophylaxis against it.

But this is not the full story. The play's surprising, yet inevitable ending reveals Carol herself to be an artificial intelligence, trapped in the network she thought she was visiting, and so casts doubt on our presumption that machines could never sing or play or think as we do. In keeping with this theme the first moment of face-to-face connection in the performance came just minutes before its end, when Host/Hostess recognized Carol as a fellow denizen of the Weed. In this paradoxical moment the special charge that comes from one human's eyes meeting another's became proof of how deeply an artificial being might feel. Therefore it should come as little surprise that it was Host/Hostess who quoted Whitman when he/she took Carol's hand for the first time and examined it: "To be in any form, what is that?" This is the question the performance both asked and enacted: What is it to be, and to what extent does something's material form—the shape of a hand or body, the layout of a stage, the form of a phrase, or the medium of a consciousness—give the thing life?

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THE UPSTAIRS CONCIERGE. By Kristoffer Diaz. Directed by KJ Sanchez. Teatro Vista, Goodman Theatre, Chicago. 29 March 2015.

In today's concierge economy the idea of paying a premium for a service is not something exclusive to the rich. Uber can be your taxi, Instacart can deliver your groceries; why not have a twenty-four-hour hotel concierge whose bed is right behind the reception desk so that she can cater to guests around the clock? This is the premise of Kristoffer Diaz's new play, which takes place in a conceivable world where slogans about family and customer service are painted on the wall for everyone to see, but trademarked so nobody can reproduce them without payment. The play is set in a new, swanky Chicago hotel, designed only for celebrities, with just three rooms and an eager-to-please concierge who provides service, and more importantly caters to some of the outlandish people that society deems fascinating. Diaz, a Guggenheim fellow and Pulitzer Prize nominee, uses farce to critique American consumer and celebrity culture, but behind all of the antics *The Upstairs Concierge* provides a solemn meditation on technology's role in producing our culture's lack of empathy.

The play begins with owners Jeffrey and Dia Hotelman welcoming the new staff for the opening of their hotel, The Concept at The Hotelman Arms. They have two comical bellhops, Kaz and Harvey, and a perkily devoted upstairs concierge, Ella Elizondo. Three individual and outlandish guests arrive, demanding that Ella manage the shenanigans of both the guests and the staff. The guests each want something different: celebrity blogger BB wants to surround himself only with celebrities, the new YouTube sensation Rebecca arrives without knowing she is being drafted by a famous baseball team, and the

John Stokvis (Kaz), Tawny Newsome (Ella Elizondo), and Theo Allyn (Mark Merriman) in *The Upstairs Concierge*. (Photo: Liz Lauren.)

covert novelist Shivery Delicious seeks the topic of her next book. As more people arrive it becomes clear that Rebecca is the focal desire for almost all of the characters because she is not only newly famous, but also holds the promise of financial gain for whomever drafts her.

As far as farce goes the production had it all. There were identity mix-ups, a faulty hall light, hidden elevators, secret closets, doors with no locks, a foam hotdog costume, and a lot of people undressing down to their underwear. A fingerprint of Diaz's style is his brash critique of American consumerism across all strata of society, and his plays are designed for and cast with much diversity. But the actor/character's race/ethnicity is not the platform from which the action is set; Diaz makes race a nonanalytic. With one of the most diverse casts I have seen in a prominent theatre, the people onstage looked like a cross-section of those walking around outside in downtown Chicago. But the play relied upon a barrage of references—Oprah Winfrey, Mike Ditka, Garrett Popcorn, multiple sports teams, and even a season subscription to the Goodman—to establish the Chicago setting rather than including characters who knew anything about Chicago other than these well-known brand names.

The entire production was a nearly nonstop verbal marathon, with no music or scene changes to break the building tension. There was only one sustained silence: when Shivery (Sandra Delgado) became convinced that Harvey (Gabriel Ruiz) wanted to communicate without words, she pantomimed the plot of her newest "novel." Delgado's nimble physicality and sense of comedic timing cohered in a lengthy silent narrative that was a compilation of every Hollywood cliché, mixed with some recognizable scenes from films such as *King Kong*, *Star Wars*, and *Alien*. It was every blockbuster rolled into one plotline, making the funniest segment in this world premiere play a visual montage of already-established "greatest moments."

Although the characters were rarely alone, live, personal interaction proved a fruitless endeavor throughout, as each person who attempted to woo Rebecca failed. Physical presence was not enough to foster better relationships in a society filled with selfish people, and as a result technology was revealed as the mediator among people rather than the upstairs concierge. Harvey uses the Internet to find out what Shivery is writing about (rather than asking her); Mark uses Apple's assistant Siri to find out which room Rebecca is staying in; and it is revealed that a viral video was responsible for

Rebecca's fame and trip to Chicago. By contrast, the budding friendship between Ella (Tawny Newsome) and Rebecca (Alejandra Escalante) grows through their personal interaction and genuine curiosity about each other. The actors developed the relationship with tenderness, and taking time to listen to each other proved the antidote to the materialistic culture surrounding them.

Diaz's most poignant observation is of society's lack of interest in reading and the inefficacy of education. Shivery's stack of paper that she claimed was her new book later proves to be a box holding sports memorabilia that she uses to woo Rebecca, and the faux books in the bookshelf are mere holders for the screw gun that Ella uses to change faulty lights. Not only are the books fake, but education does not bring happiness or success to anyone in this technology-based information age. Shivery, the "successful novelist," is only recognized by one of the dopey bellhops; nobody with education, money, or social skills has heard of her. She eventually reveals that she too is only there to draft Rebecca onto a baseball team, thus making money by exploiting someone else.

As the tension mounted most of the cast stripped down to their underwear and the lights began to dim. Director KJ Sanchez staged this typically intimate act of revealing oneself as the climactic moment for the farce. The final moments were chaotic, with the characters running all over the set—jumping, sliding, screaming. To halt the action Ella turned on the lights, exposing their bodies and their ridiculous behavior. Once they were physically covered again they quickly restarted their pursuit of Rebecca, showing that their selfishness could not be stopped. The only way to end the ongoing cycle of greedy capitalism was to turn the lights out completely; by turning off the technology Ella and Rebecca could leave everyone else behind and enjoy that rare privilege of quality time alone with a new friend. Diaz concludes that technology, fame, and fortune do not bring people happiness; care without expectation of recompense brings the greatest of rewards.

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TWITCH PLAYS POKEMON. By Anonymous. Based on the Videogame *Pokemon Red* by Satoshi Tajiri. Python scripts bridging web input to VisualBoyAdvance, emulating Game Boy. February 2014.

MARI/O. By Seth Bling. Based on the Videogame *Super Mario World* by Takashi Tezuka and Shigeru Miyamoto. Lua script for BizHawk, emulating Super Nintendo Entertainment System. June 2015.

DREEPS. By Hisanori Hiraoka. iOS. January 2015.

If performance works with agency, then games are the genre of performance that best highlight the ostentatious display of such agency. In particular, video games and professional spectator sports seemingly transport players and viewers into bodies perfectly oriented toward achieving pointless, artificial goals that replace unattainable, authentic ones. This certainly describes one register of gameplay, and one that is worth a lot of money—as I am writing this, *The Witcher 3*, starring a be-stubbled, poisoned-sword-wielding loner, just moved 4 million copies in under a month—but it is far from the only mode in which games can function and even prosper. Along with the rest of the past half-century's explosion of diversity in game forms and styles, there have also been an enormous variety of experiments in modes of agency. This review highlights a few popular examples from the past couple of years that present extreme points on one spectrum of methods for mapping players to digital agents.

The traditional model of idealized protagonist identification in old media finds its video game correlate in a *single player mapped to a single agent*. If this stands at the midpoint on the continuum of agent/player relationships, then two extreme points would be: *as many players as possible mapped to a single agent*, and *no players mapped to a single agent*. Both of these extreme positions have popular exemplars from the last two years, and the most famous of these exemplars are "hacks"—modifications of existing games intended specifically to press them into other modes of agency.

Both of these positions act as synecdoches for categories of postindustrial labor. The second position names *authentic automatism*: labor replaced by mechanical effort; the first names *counterfeit automatism*: intensified labor that serves to hide itself and feign automatism. This is the labor involved in "sharing economy" services like Uber, which collapse human effort down to unified interfaces. Its historical prototype is Wolfgang von Kempelen's 1770 fake robot,