

The Whitney Biennial Puts Its Spin on Dramatic Theater

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The 2012 Whitney Biennial has used its opened-up fourth floor to present various forms of performance, tending toward the somewhat experimental. But the program made a nod to traditional theater with New York-based Yair Oelbaum's "There Will Be Buried," a residency that culminated in a "dramatic play." The consistently awful quality of the play and the production did not, however, favor the Whitney's attempts to move beyond customary art forms, in this case by becoming a theater impresario.

Oelbaum directed and designed the set, and performed as part of an ensemble of five, joined by, among others, artist Kai Althoff.

Althoff is represented in the Biennial by a large, stylized untitled installation on the second floor. He and Oelbaum seem to connect on their pursuit of mystery: the latter has a web page that shows photo documentation of variously named projects, though there is no descriptive information beyond titles. The Whitney press office said he describes himself as, "a writer whose practice has grown to incorporate photography, sculpture, film, music, and performance."

In a series of scenes, which unfolded in front of plastic curtains, Althoff and Oelbaum play female characters, vaguely mothers of a possibly missing child. The two embark on what is supposed to be a journey to find the child, but the scenes are non-progressive and interchangeable as they all seem to cycle through the same narrative elements. Both Althoff and Oelbaum claim at different points to be the mother of the missing child, and they both question whether the child even exists (think Edward Albee). The dialogue is mostly conveyed through an echoey audio recording, which occasionally doubles as an unseen character.

Apart from the missing the child, the characters often refer to or discuss some kind of religion; they pray or address a goddess.

Althoff and Oelbaum both talk about a shortage of memory (theirs and/or societal), a big wink to the audience about the unreliability of the narration. Dialogue is marked by grandiosity and repetition and a limited vocabulary. The acting style is plainly amateur, which might be by choice or lack of an alternative. Mostly this consists of Althoff and Oelbaum gesturing with both hands at each other as they mouth the recorded words and simper and dance around the stage. At one point, Althoff plays a guitar.

A TV monitor at center stage right shows an out-of-sync recording of a different performance of the play (think The Wooster Group). The costumes by Camilla Carper look like children playing dress-up with random unused pieces of cloth. The set has various big things (a dining table and chairs, a large stuffed elephant), all covered in a red and grey upholstery fabric, waiting to be revealed. Unsurprisingly, Althoff is hiding under one of them, for no particular reason.

According to the program, Oelbaum and Althoff have been "developing" the piece since 2010, and have performed it before in Essex, England. The convoluted Whitney program description is the same as for the Essex production.

Given a glorious expanse of four thousand square feet and nearly limitless lighting possibilities, they unimaginatively staged the play, tightly huddled, facing into a corner, hanging plastic curtains on rods suspended from the ceiling, such that the playing area looked like a traditional



proscenium stage with the audience sharply divided from the actors and the curtains concealing a backstage area. They also covered the fourth floor's large window, thus turning the museum into a badly designed black box. The spectators, those who stayed, sat on risers facing the stage.

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