

DRIVEN TO EXTREMITIES

There is a very thin line between breaking down the wall between spectator and performer and simply freaking the audience out. As we talk about his Fringe production, *Car Stories*, director/creator Donovan King is scaring me.

With the work, audience-members are encouraged to join the action – indeed, during some moments they may not have a choice. King sees this as a positive thing: a way of creating pure theatre. I see it as a nightmare. Acting and dealing with claustrophobia; did I tell you that *Car Stories* will have audience members stuffed into the backseat of a car while the play takes place in the front seat? But how you or I may react to all this, including opting out completely or yelling, “This is a load of bullshit!” is what shapes the performance. Says King, “In one instance, when we tried this in Calgary, we encouraged a debate about what this was supposed to be and what it meant in creative and theatrical terms.”

King is a maverick. The word is tossed around constantly in the theatre, but the proof, here, is in the pudding: he is currently at war with his professors at University of Calgary to get any of a number of directing projects accepted as his master's thesis. The problem is that King's theatrical background is not solely academic. He spent four years travelling and working around the world, including mounting Shakespeare in swimming pools and a stint at The Dungeon, London, England's truly sick alternative to Madame Tussaud's. “I am aiming at a theatre that breaks all rules and getting everyone to participate and play and at Calgary they are teaching ‘the rules,’” King says.

Car Stories starts in the Fringe beer tent and the spectators are led (three at a time, so book ahead!) to a secret parking lot. They are then led through four cars, each a different experience involving some members of a “company.” The spectators in the back seat will be challenged to play,” says King, “They can opt out, I suppose...cross into the action and honk the horn, but that, too, is a form of participation.”

Besides the spectators and company, there will also be guest artists, who don't really have to be artists at all, who host and participate more directly. “We have non-theatre people; it's not about training, reputation or status – it's about ‘anyone can play.’”

The visceral, Freudian image that springs to mind most adamantly as I read the papers related to the project or speak to its creator is this: “Come into my parlour” – a seduction followed by an act of theatrical cannibalism. “There is the possibility of being eaten alive,” says King. “If people can't play they shouldn't do it.” However, he adds, “There's very little risk here because you're not walking onto a stage in front of hundreds of people. Think of it more as being Alice in Wonderland.”

Plotting is utterly fluid and can change from performance to performance and day to day. “It's always a process,” says King. “It's not about the product. It's about challenging the rules. Ultimately, it's about social betterment.”

It is also, importantly, about how the spectator reacts; this determines the final emotional impact, and, says King, whether “it's nightmare or dream... whatever you want to call it.”

Yikes!

Car Stories
RUNS JUNE 15-19, 21-24.

(COVER) CAR STORIES TAKES THEATRE AND AUDIENCES TO THE LIMIT

by GAËTAN L. CHARLEBOIS



PHOTO KARL PHILIP DUARTE