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Theater

YOU GOTTA HAVE ♥ Ken Urban’s I ♥ KANT

by Isaac Butler

One summer while in college, Ken Urban had an epiphany. “I had a job, which lasted exactly one day,” Urban informed me, “where I hauled vats of chemicals around an abandoned manufacturing plant in Pennsylvania.... That was the day I decided to get a *Ph.D* in English and become a playwright.” Since his illustrious beginnings, Urban has built a reputation both as an academic and an artist. Playwright Lee Blessing commented, “Ken’s clearly a gifted and intelligent writer.... He seems to work with equal aplomb in realism and non-realism, and I think both approaches are lucky to get him.” Urban is also a well-regarded authority on the works of Sarah Kane, and directed the New York premier of her play *Cleansed*.

Last summer, director Dylan McCullough had his own epiphany while attending the Lincoln Center Directors’ Lab. After seeing a reading of Urban’s *The Absence of Weather*, McCullough knew he wanted to direct Urban’s work. His experience as a director of new works (including an adaptation of David Foster Wallace’s *Brief Interviews With Hideous Men* for the NY Fringe) made him a good fit for Urban’s writing.

McCullough is now one of the resident directors for Urban’s own theatre company, The Committee Theatre. According to their website, the company “produce[s] plays that focus on periods of historical transformation ... these are violent moments, exciting and terrifying. In the face of catastrophe, characters...are stripped of their moral compass and must create a new vision of the world.” Since its founding in 2002 by Urban and Ryan Rummage, The Committee has produced readings, workshops and productions of nine plays, by authors including Urban, Sarah Kane, and Peter Morris.

I ♥ KANT is McCullough and Urban’s first full-scale collaboration. It is also the beginning of a larger project—an effort by Urban to stage the entirety of his *New Jersey Trilogy* (of which *KANT* is the first part) over the next two years.

The play is set in our current period of historical transformation. Urban began writing it in late 1998, and finished in February 2001 and “hasn’t changed a word of it since then.” The play chronicles the (mis)adventures of four modern women in New Jersey. Linda, a woman in her late 20s is furiously attempting to finish her *Ph.D* dissertation; Betsy, in her 30s, is reeling from recently getting drunk

and having sex with her brother; Pam may or may not have been killed in a terrorist bombing incident in her office; and Maureen’s problems include a heroin habit and a deadbeat boyfriend.

To Urban, writing for a predominantly single-sex cast gives him an opportunity to allow “relationships to develop in interesting ways. Plus there are so many great women actors out there and I know they get frustrated always playing someone’s girlfriend... I wouldn’t be happy if I was an actor and I was playing a part called ‘Fag’ every night and my character died of AIDS in the first five minutes.”

The play’s thematic density creates one of many great challenges for any artistic team. The action happens simultaneously within the four women’s separate worlds, with one male actor running between them playing various roles. Urban’s scripts frequently, as he puts it, “ask the impossible” of the people who work on them.

And underlying all of this is the thinker at the play’s core and its title: German philosopher Immanuel Kant. Specifically, *I ♥ KANT* both addresses and plays around with Kant’s moral and aesthetic philosophy. It takes the idea of the autonomous human being capable of moral and rational reasoning and shows the struggle four of those beings go through relating to the world at large.

Aesthetically, the play literally dramatizes the idea of the sublime. It was this idea that drew Urban to Kant in the first place. “Kant is such a contradiction. He is a fairly conservative thinker, bound by his Christianity. And yet he has this wonderful concept, the sublime, which as he defines it, is this inexpressible aesthetic experience which must be both terrifying and liberating, and that is interesting.”

Where this leads the play is to a moment that cannot be qualified—it must literally be seen to be believed. “Something happens” as the stage directions say. When I pressed Urban for a little clarification, he explains it thusly; “It is so weird and wonderful and maybe even sublime. But it cannot be fully fleshed out in stage directions or language, so each production has to figure out a way to do it.”

It is lucky, then, that Ken and Dylan have such enthusiasm and collaborative zeal to draw on from each other. “This is the play I have been waiting to direct for probably five years,” comments McCullough, “It took that long to find a play that asked all the questions I want to ask right now.”

To find out more about The Committee Theatre, check out their website <http://thecommitteetheatre.org> and their blog, <http://thecommitteetheatre.blogspot.com>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Isaac Butler is a director and writer living in Brooklyn. You can read his writings on issues of arts, culture, politics and what not at his website, <http://parabasis.typepad.com>.