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Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man

by **Lauren Snyder**

This Is Not a Pipe Dream reviewed May 28, 2006

For parents,

theater can be a great teaching tool.

Performances can expose children to art and other cultures (through the action onstage) as well as to ideas about self-control and group behavior (through the act of sitting in an audience). Most important, going to the theater is a bonding experience that can be continued through adulthood; as sons and daughters age, parents can look forward to taking them to more sophisticated fare.

Family-theater purveyors the Paddywack Players are presenting Barry Kornhauser's *This Is Not a Pipe Dream*, a theater-and-art collage that delves into the formative years of Belgian surrealist artist René Magritte as well as the creation of theater. The show's messages, to be true to yourself and to follow your dreams, are familiar ones, but here they are wrapped in an imaginative, challenging production that appeals to the young set—with a few tricks up its sleeve to keep the adults tuned in, too.

Walking into the recently redone Richmond Shepard Theater (formerly the Vineyard), the audience is greeted to its first dose of surrealism, in the form of the theater space. The playing area—featuring cloudy-skied flats and children's wooden chairs suspended from the ceiling—is set up with half of its audience in front of it and half to the side, where the stage right "wings" would be. A projector is tucked away toward the main entrance.

The show opens on Magritte as an infant, captivated by a mobile (the airborne chairs). A character named the Interlocutor enters, explaining that we are seeing a play and that this is not actually Magritte, since he lived a long time ago. Rather, this is an actor playing a character named René who represents Magritte, just as Magritte's famous painting of a pipe (bearing the inscription "This is not a pipe") is only a representation of a pipe. Meta-theatrical tricks abound, as do wordplay, slapstick, visual gags, sound effects, and slides of the artist's work. Later in the piece, more serious themes about life and death begin to emerge.

Clearly, this is a play created with the attention spans of its key audience (children) in mind. The first half incorporates a lot of action and silliness, which made the younger audience members roar in appreciation. (Older audience members were fonder of jokes involving the breaking of the fourth wall, though everyone seemed to enjoy the broad, but still pretty clean, humor.)



Cherry Lou Sy, David Brown, Isabel Steubel-Johnson, Wali Collins, and Alex Pierce
Photo Credit: Peter Konerko

With the little ones' interest captured, the show goes deeper, addressing Magritte's philosophies and following his search for his "lost" mother. (The painter's mother actually committed suicide by drowning herself in a river, but this is never referred to directly.) This section prompted a few boys and girls to pose questions to their parents, which, though a little disturbing to fellow theatergoers, should be seen as a positive reaction. Rather than ignore what they didn't understand, these tykes sought to understand it.

The actors did a fine job switching between performance styles, having to tackle realism, to-the-audience oration, and Keystone Kops high jinks in the show's 60 minutes. As the Interlocutor, Wali Collins used his strong baritone and expressive face to great effect. As René's parents, Alex Pierce (as a buffoonish stuffed shirt) and Isabel Steuble-Johnson (as a sympathetic voice of wisdom) endowed their characters with enough spirit to get them beyond caricature.

David Brown's René, however, was tough to pin down. Although Magritte was 14 at the time of his mother's death, Brown seemed at times to be playing a toddler, letting out infantile squeals and padding along in bare feet like a new walker. Then he would stand a little more upright and speak as an adult, with no explanation as to why his character was grown up for a few sentences. Perhaps a quick change of lighting or costume would have clarified those moments better.

Director Tracy Bersley has obviously put these actors through their paces; a lot of potentially chaotic scene changes and movements went off without a hitch. The slide show portion, which can trip up even the slickest of shows, seemed equally well rehearsed.

The press release for *This Is Not a Pipe Dream* suggests that it is "suitable for ages 5 to 105," which is a cutesy way of saying the show's appeal is "ageless." At the performance that I attended, the 5- to 9-year-olds in attendance were the most enthusiastic members of the crowd. (They were also pretty enthused about the free cookies given to them before the show.) Rather than market itself as an all-ages affair, perhaps the production should follow its own mantra of being true to itself and embrace its own wacky, dark inner child.



David Brown as young René Magritte
Photo Credit: Peter Konerko

THIS IS NOT A PIPE DREAM

The Richmond Shepard Theatre

Category: Children's Theater

Written by: Barry Kornhauser

Directed by: Tracy Bersley

Produced by: The Paddywack Players | Gwen Brownson & Laura Brownson

Opens: May 27, 2006

Closes: June 25, 2006

Running Time: 60 minutes (without intermission)

Theater: The Richmond Shepard Theatre

Address: 309 East 26th Street between 1st & 2nd Ave
New York, NY

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Creative Team

Written by: Barry Kornhauser

Directed by: Tracy Bersley

Produced by: The Paddywack Players, and Gwen & Laura Brownson

Set Designer: Jeff Van Velsor

Costume Designer: Hester Wagner

Lighting Designer: Ben Travis

Cast

David Brown as René Magritte

Wali Collins as Interlocutor

Alex Pierce as Father Isabel Steuble-Johnson as Mother/Georgette

Cherry-Lou Sy as Stage Manager/Teacher

Crew

Stage Manager: Heather Heels