

'Privacy' play translates the future into powerful vernacular

🕒 Aug 19, 2016

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I don't know where to start.

Perhaps that's just what James Graham and Josie Rourke wanted when they wrote "Privacy," (<http://publictheater.org/en/Tickets/Calendar/PlayDetailsCollection/1516/Privacy/>) a show not-so-much-a-show but more, an experience. It an experience that just wrapped up its summer run at the Public Theatre in New York City.

Divorce the word "privacy" from its function as the title of this play. On its own, it's a rather unwieldy umbrella of perspectives, from cultural differences to religious insights to technology, surveillance, advertising, healthcare and – shiver – what makes us human.

This ambitious piece aims to tackle it all.

"Privacy" isn't all empty ambition, either, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Some context: our in-man is The Writer, played with a sort of approachable, frenetic vulnerability by *Harry Potter's* Daniel Radcliffe. Most of what we know about him is that he's a British playwright still reeling from a rather pernicious breakup a year ago. Blindsided one evening by lingering feelings of confusion, sadness, and anger, he writes an email to "The Ex," and his regret over the action and frustration at previous accusations of being too "closed off" and "private" lead him to seek the wisdom of a counselor in the show's opening scene. It's a rather quick visit, one that concludes with The Writer deciding he will conquer his discomfort with sharing – online and otherwise – by moving to New York City. That his ex lives there is wholly coincidental (wink).

From there our protagonist meets a revolving door of bonafide privacy, security, governmental, and tech superstars, played deftly by De'Adre Aziza, Raffi Barsoumian, Michael Countryman, Rachel Dratch and Reg Rodgers, as he goes about transitioning into his new world. We see TeachPrivacy CEO Dan Solove in a taxi, Senator Ron Wyden, D-Ore., in The Writer's apartment, and government higher-ups-who-shall-not-be-named-for-secrecy's-sake in a corner café, among many others. The show uses the actors' various hat-wearing to humorous effect, a subtle reminder of the potentially fluid nature of online identity, as each provides opinion after opinion and fact after fact without overarching commentary. That's one of the show's strengths: the audience is never told what to feel. We are allowed to own our discomfort and awe, applying it to what we will, leaving The Writer just identity-less enough so that viewers can easily project themselves upon him.

understanding our technological present is treated a bit like Alice's foray through Wonderland, with actors stumbling from one sort of surreal set piece to another. And perhaps that's the point. "The cast (is) ready to guide you to places you never dreamed you'd go – even if those places are residing in that small computer you carry around in your pocket," writes Oskar Eustis, artistic director of the Public Theater. The production commits to this theme so thoroughly that it communicates pre-show instructions through a spiel akin to those pre-flight, and viewers are treated to an explanation of its cellphone policy with cards that mimic the safety manuals on a plane. Unlike at any other stage production, this one eagerly encourages the audience to keep their phones silent but very much *on* – they'll be needed during the show, you see.

Mobiles are not the only technology the show welcomes.

"Privacy" uses multimedia tricks to profound affect, allowing for visitors from abroad (cough, cough) to share in the fun, and for the audience to understand the inner workings of our protagonist more clearly. An onstage "researcher" uses real-time tricks to silently yet concretely communicate the reality of online-sharing consequences.

"In this, [the actors] are fearlessly following the fundamental rule of artistic creation: form and content must reflect one another, indeed become one another," Eustis continues. It's true. We are watching a show about ... watching. The fourth wall is left in tatters by the end of the performance. The play ironically stars perhaps one of the most recognizable faces in the world as a character who's afraid to exist online, who begins his journey in what should be an intimate space: a counselor's office. "Privacy" is comprised of an exults in contradictions, and the opposing and conflicting viewpoints that often hound ideas of privacy, surveillance, and self.

There was much to love about the show, but it was experiencing the reactions of the audience as they are, in many cases, introduced to these contradictions that made it such a special, unique theatrical experience. I can't say much without disclosing the inner workings of the plot, but as members began to understand the far-reaching ramifications of all that privacy is, all it encompasses, and how ... grey the questions and answers around it can be, the reactions were visceral and powerful. In short: it's an effective play. Even I, an initiated-yet-fledgling privacy professional, left the theatre thinking hard about whether my online presence was robbing me of something, or about *that* scene where a technologist explains that the cost of a life's worth of data, saved on a zip drive, costs only 10 cents. "Take care of it," The Writer says forlornly as the techie pockets the drive. Minor existential tailspin, ahoy!

I know I wasn't the only one feeling this way. Conversation buzzed as theatre goers waited for a peek of star Radcliffe after the show.

Privacy pros, heads up: if anything, "Privacy" is helping translate our industry's dialogue from something foreign and frightening into a sensible vernacular. As fluency grows, prepare to dialogue.

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