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*Under the Sycamores* by Les Hunter (review)

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Each monologue hit several relatable and heart-string-tugging beats. I caught myself welling up as Schulman described their grandfather's forty-three-year marriage to "Mom-mom," and again as they recounted the feelings of frustration, anger, and helplessness that comes with losing a dear friend to a sudden accident. I was not alone. This shared affect circulated through us all, evident in melancholic eyes, falling tears, and expressions of recognition passing over each face visible in the Zoom grid. After the second monologue, the Host held up a small piece of ornately stitched black fabric, reminiscent of a mourning veil, and guided us through the ritual of kria, explaining, "We'll rip our garments together. In doing so, you identify yourself as a mourner, and more importantly, it gives you a chance to express our loss in a single certain moment." This structured mourning was a main impetus for the playwrights to share shiva with those who were perhaps at a loss for ways to process their loss and grief in isolation. Judging from the blink-and-you'll-miss-it smiles that darted across participants' faces as they tore their pieces of paper and cloth, it was clear that Behrend and Schulman were tapping into a deep well of unprocessed emotion at the height of the pandemic.

After this half-hour marking absence and loss, Behrend and Schulman offer an audio file to be listened to individually on the traditional post-shiva "walk around the block." The audio greets us: "Imagine yourself outside. We begin outside. There's an infinity to stress, worry, and grieve over in the world right now." Of course, Schulman's voice reminds us that "our grieving is far from over. However, this is a way of marking time." The companion reader, which includes a brief call-and-response script for use during the performance, helps to further ground this moment of performance in time, borrowing lyrics from contemporary musical artist *serpentwithfeet*, a meditation on loss from Judith Butler, the Rabbi's speech from Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*, and stage directions from Behrend and Schulman's never-performed *Now at the End Again*.

As we begin in late-2021 to exit the height of pandemic restrictions in the United States (regardless of whether the pandemic is itself exiting), I am left with a blurry amalgam of Zoom-play memories, some better than others, none remarkably memorable. What makes *Welcome to the Shiva House* stand out is the radical care inherent to the project: care for the audience, empathy for an unprecedented cultural situation, and an experimental mode of making community, achieved through the performance of multiple methods of connection, all with their accompanying temporalities: the liveness of being together in a virtual space, the memories presented through storytelling, and the multimedia

aspect that has a synchronous and asynchronous life within and outside of the production.

The intentionality of marking time throughout Behrend and Schulman's media both anchored us and allowed us to ruminate on temporality's relationship to our ideas of what is considered "live" performance. The pandemic has its own terrifying velocity, while many of us find ourselves in stand-stills, cycles of recursion or regression, or perhaps grief has shattered our sense of time altogether. *Welcome to the Shiva House* threw into relief what is now clear in retrospect: that our ever-changing conception of "liveness" not only corresponds to our technologies and innovations, but to our wants and needs as a culture, here being the need to ground ourselves as we are unmoored in time through incalculable loss, media oversaturation, and isolation.

**MICHAEL VALDEZ**

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**UNDER THE SYCAMORES.** By Les Hunter. Directed by Jimmy A. Noriega. Radio by the Lake and Borderlight at the Erie Street Cemetery, Cleveland. September 17, 2021.

Although historical cemetery tours abound in tourist locations such as Savannah and Charleston, Radio on the Lake's *Under the Sycamores* transcended a genre primarily known for ghosts and half-baked history to create a truly unique experience for the participant. In only its second year, Borderlight, Cleveland's resident fringe festival, offered its first commissioned work, a showcase of the history of the city that is all too often known as the "Mistake on the Lake." Written by Les Hunter and directed



Erie Street Cemetery and the Cleveland skyline.  
(Photo: Dave Robar.)



The front gate with Progressive Field behind. (Photo: Dave Robar.)

by Jimmy A. Noriega, *Under the Sycamores* offered a glimpse into the colorful figures buried in Cleveland's Erie Street Cemetery while bringing audience agency and fierce civic pride to the fore.

*Under the Sycamores* embodied much of the best of the original tradition of site-specific theatre in its embrace and illustration of all that the Erie Street Cemetery has to offer. Coined in the early 1980s to indicate that the nontraditional location of the staging was integral to the play, the term *site-specific theatre* has since expanded to encompass numerous styles and approaches, used in some cases to indicate only that the performance did not take place in a theatre. However, *Under the Sycamores* held to the approach of British theatre group Wrights and Sights, in that the performance was specifically crafted to peel back the layers of a specific location. Going further, the play embraced the mode of promenade theatre, a subset of site-specific work that asks the viewer to move about the space and, in some cases, interact with it. Critic Andy Field wrote in the *Guardian* of his concerns that many productions labeled "site-specific" simply borrow the aesthetics of the location in an inorganic manner, particularly as the site-specific label grows more bloated and diffuse.

*Under the Sycamores* resisted this expansion and painted a vivid picture where the setting blended seamlessly with the performance.

Billed as a self-paced walking tour where one was invited to "choose your own path," *Under the Sycamores* borrowed elements of audience agency from the choose-your-own-adventure form without fully embracing the possibility of alternate plot outcomes. The play was structured as a self-guided audio tour offered through the audience's smartphone. Audience members were directed to various locations in the cemetery where they then heard a story about the person buried there. Although many were first-person accounts of the life of the character as narrated by the character's ghost, some were not, relying upon storytelling from a relative or descendant. Participants were generally able to skip stories they were not interested in, and were able to pause and rewind the action as needed.

The stories of *Under the Sycamores* could be listened to in any order, or skipped altogether at the audience member's discretion. Although such choices did not alter the overall plot of the piece, it did allow for audience members to craft their own

experiences, fostering a sense of agency in the listener. Choose-your-own-adventure was pioneered in a series of bestselling young adult novels that placed the reader as the main character and offered choices at major plot junctures. The choices of the reader could radically alter the plot and its ending. Recent theatrical experiments such as *Inheritance* by Vancouver's Touchstone Theatre or Canberra's Boho Interactive have begun integrating the form into dramatic presentation. For *Under the Sycamores*, the audience was empowered to decide whose voices should be lifted to the fore as part of the experience. This model also allowed for social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The script by playwright Les Hunter emphasized the themes of death in life and life in death, which was underlined by the location of the play itself. Erie Street Cemetery is located in the heart of downtown Cleveland, across the street from Progressive Field, where Cleveland's Major League Baseball team plays, and a mere stone's throw away from Playhouse Square. The effect was a quiet patch of tranquil green amid the bustle of a busy metropolis. Even though a baseball game with thousands of cheering fans may have been going on just across the street, the stillness of the cemetery was palpable. Even through ear buds, the muffled sound of traffic, sport, and construction pervaded the cemetery, throwing the calm of the graveyard into sharp relief, emphasized by its counterpoint to the surrounding city. The audience, engrossed in stories of Cleveland's past, could not escape the city's present. The effect, as opposed to being one of distraction, underlined the feeling of deathly stillness in the midst of abundant life.

As the term *site-specific* comes to encompass more and more disparate areas of theatre, one cannot help but echo Field's assessment that standard theatre is simply dressing itself up in the trappings of radical technique while reproducing itself. Such an approach, where a playwright such as Shakespeare or Marlowe is staged nontraditionally but without a true, organic connection to the location, may be relatively easy to execute but tends to overshadow the special connection to location of site-specific theatre and leave experimental works struggling for air. *Under the Sycamores*, with its generous embrace of location such that it fundamentally could not be staged anywhere else effectively, sounded a clarion call for critical attention to the theatrical opportunity that is offered by the world around us.

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**WOMEN OF CIUDAD JUÁREZ.** By Cristina Michaus. Translated and directed by Jimmy A. Noriega. Teatro Travieso/Troublemaker Theatre, Círculo Teatral, Mexico City. July 19, 2021.

*Women of Ciudad Juárez* has traveled to many places since its debut in 2014, but its short run in Mexico is particularly significant, as it is the first time this Mexican text was presented in English to a Mexican audience. A heavily hyper-cultural performance text, this production operated through various, complicated layers of translation, retranslation, and circulation: a play about feminicides in a Mexican border city, written in Spanish by a Mexican playwright and activist, translated and directed into English by a Latino scholar and director, performed by a diverse cast of US-based actresses, and engaging with a Mexico City audience. In this run, the play itself performed Teatro Travieso/Troublemaker Theatre's mission of exposing and disrupting power structures across the region. The production's circulation shows how nuances of shared complicities vary from place to place. For *Women of Ciudad Juárez* activates different forms of implication uniquely for each spectator, depending on factors like lived experiences, relationships to the show's languages, and familiarity with the story of the murdered women of Juárez.

Written by Mexican playwright Cristina Michaus in 2001, the play is made up of an episodic series of monologues for innumerable voices that portray multiple perspectives on life for women in Ciudad Juárez, a Mexican town bordering El Paso, Texas. Focusing on the many forms of violence enacted daily against the female body and psyche, the play speaks most specifically of the murdered women of Juárez. Starting in January 1993 and escalating drastically once the NAFTA agreement came into effect in 1994, a series of horrific murders of young women began taking place in Juárez. After almost three decades the feminicides continue, with very few arrests and even less convictions. In 2020 alone, the names of another 200 teenage girls and women who were abducted, tortured, and murdered were added to the long list of victims.

Latino director and scholar Jimmy A. Noriega translated the play into English in 2013, hoping to raise awareness beyond a Spanish-speaking audience of the atrocities taking place in Juárez. The translation adapted the monologues to be performed by three to four performers and was produced by Noriega's bilingual US-based company, Teatro Travieso/Troublemaker Theatre, an intersectional