

TORNADO SEASON. By Emily K. Harrison.

Directed by Charlotte Brecht Munn. square product theatre, ATLAS Center for the Performing Arts, Boulder, CO. 20 March 2009.

Increasingly, solo performance and other live productions use media as a kind of “fifth wall.” *Tornado Season*, a solo piece written and performed by Emily Harrison, is a multimedia memoir that parallels the internal tornados of her adult life with the very real and terrifying tornados that frequent the place of her birth: the pine trees and oil fields of East Texas. Through the use of innovative streaming video, live sound design, and a moving script, the piece transported the audience to a place of striking contradictions, where the West meets the South, the Bible Belt meets tornado alley, frightening snakes fill the beautiful Red River, an abundance of crystal meth pollutes the endless blue sky, and debutantes mingle with cowboys. The protagonist is trapped in a world where death and destruction are looming, either from floods from the south, fires from the west, or the unpredictable and indiscriminate course of tornados. She illustrates her fears from her own perspective as a young girl through that of an adult when she escaped from East Texas.

While the personal tornados of Harrison’s life first appear to her as prominent and terrifying as those in her hometown, it is after she leaves home that the most destructive emotional tornado finds her: a lover whose incessant infidelity leaves irreparable destruction in his wake. Harrison realizes that even with the miles and years that are between her and East Texas, it is really never possible to leave home; no matter where she goes, she can never truly escape emotional turmoil or destructive forces, but like all of us, there is a time when she has to learn how to recover from the devastation, pick up the pieces, and rebuild her life.

Although the script is touching, the uniqueness of *Tornado Season*, however, lies in how it uses multimedia, which was improvised for each performance, allowing for the roles of the sound and video stream to function as other characters in the play, and giving Harrison something to react and respond to each time she performed, a twenty-first-century version of Svoboda’s work. The live sound score, designed and improvised nightly by Toby Sinkinson, involved the use of Pure Data (an open-source, real-time, graphical programming environment for audio, video, and graphical processing). Sinkinson built a device, as an interface, using an Arduino microcontroller. For the sections of the play in which the media was improvised he worked within certain parameters, but used the random-object feature in



Emily K. Harrison in *Tornado Season*.
(Photo: Marcin Mroz.)

Pure Data in order to trigger sound events within those parameters (such as the sound simulations of tornados that he found and created). Harrison reacted onstage to the unpredictable sounds, obviously aware that the sounds that were to come would be big though unsure in what direction they would move. Sinkinson used a broad spectrum of sound: just as the thunderous arrival of a tornado jolted the audience and Harrison, the opposite reaction was generated by the calming, almost imperceptibly quiet sound of a cricket.

The video did not distract, as can sometimes be the case with media in the theatre, but rather embodied a poetic presence; realistic footage became abstract by the use of Isadora video technology. Charlotte Brecht Munn and Harrison created a video stream that was constant throughout the play, yet many of the streams were repetitive. This guided the audience to focus on the footage projected only when it was pertinent to the plot or when Harrison interacted with it. The screens, which were set at the back of the stage and also stage right, projected footage that juxtaposed images of Harrison as a child as well as clips from *The Wizard of Oz* and other pertinent films. The predominant videos, however, were of the foreboding skies of a tornado and the destruction left behind. The only other set pieces were a child’s school desk and a swing center stage, allowing for focus to be given strictly to the actor, the screens, the sounds, and the actor’s reaction to these. The video stream and the unique sound score showcased the method of collaboration that is at the core of each of square product theatre’s productions.

The collaboration in *Tornado Season* climaxed in a striking scene in which a live video feed projected images of Harrison shot from an aerial camera above the stage. In the preceding monologue, while Harrison pondered the destruction that her own emo-

tional tornados have wreaked within her, she sat in the swing, center stage, and twisted the chains tightly in small circles. When she finished speaking, she let go, and the chains untwisted and sent her spinning. The live video (rendered and delayed by a fraction of a second) along with the music gave the audience a moving glimpse of the tornado inside of the woman. The principal idea behind all of square product theatre's productions is to collaborate with other artists in order to promote theatre as a means for communication and change. It varies the use of the method of collaboration for each production, and it has hit a high note with *Tornado Season*. The idea to improvise the media for each performance created a compelling parallel to the unpredictable actions of tornados.

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BARE. Book by Jon Hartmere and Damon Intrabartolo. Music by Damon Intrabartolo. Lyrics by Jon Hartmere. Directed by Jeff Church. Musical direction by Anthony T. Edwards. Unicorn Theatre, Kansas City, MO. 16 May 2009.

Every generation needs to hear a story that the one before them already knows; still, that story requires a revisioning to fit the shifts in cultural context. The tale of two young star-crossed lovers (who both happen to be male) finds a twenty-first-century audience with *bare*. Premiering in 2000, *bare* is a cult hit in many cities; teen and twenty-somethings are enamored with the music and *their* story. One of only a handful of professional companies that have



KC Comeaux (Peter), Tony Humrichouser (Priest), and Shea Coffman (Matt) in *bare*.

(Photo: Cynthia Levin.)



Katie McCreary (Angel), Craig Allen (Angel), and Nedra Dixon (Sister Chantelle) in *bare*.

(Photo: Cynthia Levin.)

included *bare* in their season, the Unicorn cleverly made the appropriate contextual shifts. The subject matter is relevant in a time when suicide among GLBT teens continues to rise and legal measures to deny civil rights for homosexuals make headlines. *Bare* is a play with many lessons about acceptance, ably conveyed through clever scenic, prop, and costume choices and a smart, appropriate collaboration between professional and educational theatre.

Bare, marketed as "a merge between *Spring Awakening* and *Dead Poet's Society*" and "the REAL *High School Musical*," explores the pains and pleasures of high school seniors at a coed Catholic boarding school: Jason, the jock who is closeted; Peter, the nerd who loves him; Ivy, the easy girl; Matt, always second-best; Nadia, the fat chick. Throw in a sassy African American teacher, a homophobic mom, and an ineffectual priest and anyone who attended high school can relate. The love story takes prominence as Peter struggles to come out against the wishes of his lover Jason. When Jason and Ivy are cast as Romeo and Juliet, he uses this opportunity to prove his manhood by bedding her. This union results in a series of predictable disasters. Reflecting *Romeo and Juliet* and *West Side Story*, *bare* juxtaposes two contemporary households as well as the cool and uncool, while depicting church doctrine and the reality of today's society, the fight within self to define identity, the lack of intra- and intergenerational understandings, and the presence of star-crossed lovers (in this case, young gay men). The reversal of gender adds a twist to the familiar tale, but the character types remain universal.

The set and props for *bare* were minimal, yet managed to convey the contemporary setting. Choir risers served as an altar, an abandoned building, and a courtyard; a simple black frame became a coffin,

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