

show listings: plays

About Silence

THEATRE

Dixon Place

OPENED

August 17, 2004

CLOSES

August 21, 2004

PERFORMANCES

Tue - Sat at 8pm

RUNNING TIME

45 minutes

TICKETS

\$12 - \$15

\$10 students/seniors

212-219-0736

AUTHOR

Peter S. Petralia

MUSIC

Andrew Shapiro

VIDEO

Francisco R. Lopez

About Silence is a new theatre piece by Peter S. Petralia (*Bunny's Last Night in Limbo*). It explores paranoia, beauty, and the pain of intimate human relationships with three people, three laptops, one video projection, and music from another world. This is part of the HOWL! Festival; there's a different cast of downtown luminaries each night:

- Aug 17: Kristin Marting, Ellie Covan, Mark Russell
- Aug 18: Thomas J. Pilutik, Normandy Sherwood, Carlton Ward
- Aug 19: Ruth Maleczek, Frederick Neumann, Clove Galilee
- Aug 20: Glenn D. Kessler, Peter S. Petralia, Jenny Seastone Stern
- Aug 21: Julie Atlas Muz, Tigger, Mistress Joy



nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · August 17, 2004

As part of this year's HOWL! Festival, Dixon Place is presenting Peter Petralia's new theatre piece, *About Silence*. This is appropriate: HOWL! is a celebration of the East Village's long and funky

tradition of alternative art; and Petralia and his work are nothing if not standard-bearers of that hallowed and wonderful tradition.

About Silence is a 45-minute performance art piece-cum-experiment in theatrical presentation. Its text is a stream-of-consciousness ramble representing all the knotty little anxieties and preoccupations that keep us from falling asleep; call it a poem, I guess—sharp, tangled, often funny phrases, images, and ideas that range all over the place, from global catastrophes to personal ones, from gnawing little nits to weird or witty non-sequitur juxtapositions. Like this:

About snakes.

Green ones.

Black ones.

Poisonous ones.

About the nice kind too.

About the one in the jungle book that had a lisp, the one that you wondered about.

Was he a gay snake?

Running through it is a not-so-submerged subtext about betrayal—an adulterous affair or something worse; something deep and fundamentally final. Petralia's language and concerns are, respectively, beautiful and bracing.

But what's most interesting to me about *About Silence* is, for want of a better term, its context: the way that Petralia has chosen to present this unusual work of theatre. It's performed by three actors, seated in a row at a table on which rest three Apple ibooks, from which they read their scripts. Petralia told me that the piece is barely rehearsed; the actors all read the same text on their screens, navigating through the document on their touchpads, reading aloud whatever they are moved to read as they encounter it. Sometimes one person reads a line, or several lines; sometimes more than one person reads the same line (with a consistent synchronization that surprised me), and some lines pass unread at all, lost to... silence.

Watching this is far more engaging than you might expect. The experience is of seeing others interact with, and react to, ideas and words in real time. Poised concentratedly at their laptops, the three performers feel more like computer gamers than actors; indeed, I imagined the words dropping down onto their screens Tetris-style as they made individual decisions about what to say and what to skip. A different cast will perform *About Silence* each night during this week-long run at the HOWL! Festival; opening night was "artistic director night," with Mark Russell (formerly of P.S. 122), Kristen Marting (of HERE), and Ellie Covan (Dixon Place) at the controls. Covan, in particular, was great fun to watch as she registered honest surprise, bafflement, and even embarrassment at some of the words Petralia wanted to put into her mouth.

An ambient musical score by Andrew Shapiro abets the piece nicely; but video by Francisco R. Lopez (of faces, usually in extreme close-up) got tiresome after a short while. The piece itself may be a little longer than it needs to be, for once the actors and the audience all get the concepts and rhythms down—say 30 minutes in—there's doesn't seem to be much more ground to cover. Nevertheless, this was a fascinating evening of theatre. More important, I think that Petralia—one of our most innovative creators of theatre (cf., *Bunny's Last Night in Limbo*, which NYTE published in *Plays and Playwrights 2002*)—will learn much from this experiment; as will the actors who get to perform it.

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