

Chicago Performance Group Revels in Ambiguity

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Early this week, Chicago-based performance group Goat Island helped to usher in a new artist series with a free, public presentation of a work in progress, titled *It's an Earthquake in My Heart*. Combining dance, mime, spoken text and drama, it was the first performance in the Maverick Artists/Visionary Educators Series, sponsored by the Henry Luce Initiative in the Emerging Arts.

Linda Weintraub, the College's new Luce Professor of Emerging Arts, introduced the piece with commentary on the series' effort to present dedicated artists/educators and cited the members of Goat Island as just that. She emphasized the ambiguous nature of the piece, stating that the group's name, which joins two unrelated words, was in itself a statement of Goat Island's eclectic approach. Weintraub described this approach as, "at first bewildering," but ultimately satisfying to the audience, who participates in the piece's construction of meaning.

From its very opening, the piece lived up to Weintraub's warning of ambiguity. The audience witnessed images, which were so open to interpretation that it seemed apparent that each audience member would indeed walk away having constructed their own meaning.

First, a woman took center stage alone, twirling her arms and hands in a fashion that seemed at times snail-like, at times machine-like and at times meditative. At points, she suddenly thrust an arm into the air above her head while simultaneously an alarm horn blew somewhere off-stage. If this beginning were not cryptic enough, she began to sway like a tree, a cloud or a piece of kelp beneath the ocean. A male voice rang out, saying in a soft monotone, "It's raining/Rain in my heart/Merry Christmas/Merry Christmas in my heart." The rest of the three-act performance flowed in a similarly surreal and dream-like manner.

Next, a complex choreography was performed first one way and then repeated backward in a manner suggesting the rewinding of a film. Leaps and body collisions were accented by a softly poetic spoken text: "Possessed by the thought that if I didn't break the world apart, disaster would strike," or, more harshly, "Number one! Be courteous! Number two! Know how to drive!"

At times the piece became a commentary on the ills of an overly mechanized modern society, especially as energetic movement was accented by angrily recited lists of rules. The performers' costumes seemed to suggest this theme of mechanization since their pockets were wired with tiny portable fans.

At other points the piece became an exploration of the dynamics of interpersonal relationships, like when two performers (of differing genders) disobeyed and traded clothes. The man wore a dress and the woman wore slacks, in what may have been a challenge to socially defined gender roles, or perhaps a commentary on the effects of sharing one's life in a romantic relationship.

The entire performance was ultimately subjective. Thus, interpretations of the work varied greatly between individuals. The piece defied a definitive theme or meaning due to Goat Island's intentional nebulousness. During the discussion following the performance, the performers re-stated the necessity of an audience to give the piece its meaning. The group did not offer any interpretation of what they had done, neither confirming nor rejecting any audience's interpretations. In fact, they even invited audience members to offer suggestions for improving the piece before it is locked into a final form.

According to the show's director, Lin Hixson, the members of Goat Island, (Karen Christopher, Matthew Goulish, Mark Jeffery and Bryan Saner) will debut the final form of *It's an Earthquake in My Heart* sometime in June of this year in Vienna, Austria.