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INTERNATIONAL REVIEW

Performa Playbill: Liz Magic Laser

By Faye Hirsch

Borrowing her techniques from 20th-century radical theater and her dialogue from the news, Liz Magic Laser mounted the excellent production "I Feel Your Pain," a Performa 11 commission, on Nov. 13 and 14. A faculty member at the School of Visual Arts, Laser took over SVA's theater facility, an ex-cinema on 23rd Street in Chelsea, where she projected live video feeds on the giant screen and skillfully engaged audience members in a biting and often hilarious satire of contemporary political and media culture in the U.S.



The performance was enlivened by some terrific acting, as a cast of eight professional players, one of them a disembodied voice, took on the roles of couples at stages of progressively disintegrating relationships. Their often fraught conversations were adapted from transcripts of TV interviews, right-wing punditry, political speeches and news conferences, as well as archival material from WPA "Living Newspapers" of the 1930s. (All sources, with welcome transparency, were identified both in the program and on the screen.) "Living Newspapers" were productions in which news events were

theatrically staged; it was a stroke of genius in our age of media spectacle that Laser used their methods—which historically ran afoul of the political establishment—as a foundation for her own technologically savvy invention.

Cameras roamed the audience in which the couples were embedded, taping their interactions and the mostly smiling reactions of the surrounding viewers. The dialogue could be really funny, particularly when quotes like "I feel your pain," the words uttered by Bill Clinton in a testy exchange with Act Up's Bob Rafsky about AIDS in 1992, were readily identified. With Laser, a subliminal romantic current in an interview between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin was made manifest, and a weeping man, spurred on by the words of Republican house speaker John Boehner, became a failing spouse. The full ideological spectrum of politics and pop culture was ventriloquized, from Christine O'Donnell to Barack Obama, Bill O'Reilly to Neil Strauss.

Especially effective was the performance's disembodied Voice, spoken by the actor Lynn Berg, which resounded through the theater and was mimed by the actress Audrey Crabtree playing a labile and vulnerable clown. This was another device borrowed from the "Living Newspapers" of the '30s, which set the precedent of a disembodied voice uttering current events.

Beneath the laughs, the knives were sharp. Repeatedly, Laser lay bare the potential for political speech to be harnessed to any ideological end. Her grand contextual disjunction first shifted the political to the personal, and then (ominously) the personal to the alienated. When two characters—The Accused and The Whistleblower—finally come to blows, we get the point. After spouting parts of George Bush's address to the nation during the economic crisis of 2008, the Accused is dealt not one, but two knockout punches by the Whistleblower. Victory is declared for the Accused, who nonetheless lies face down on the stage. It felt very bleak, and very real, at a time when the culprits of the financial meltdown are slapped with huge bonuses. Up may be down, and down up, but in her clever performance Laser devised a way through all the blather.