

THEATER

Review: In ‘Ludic Proxy,’ a Blur of Actual and Virtual Reality

Ludic Proxy | Off Off Broadway, Play | Closing Date: May 2, 2015

By ALEXIS SOLOSKI APRIL 12, 2015

Nina, a Russian woman now living with her sister in America, finds herself back in her childhood apartment. She sees her mailbox, her mother’s kitchenware, her father’s vodka bottles, “all the books we left behind.” But Nina isn’t really home; she’s watching her nephew play a version of the video game *Call of Duty*, set in Pripyat, the Ukrainian town she was forced to evacuate after the Chernobyl disaster.

“Ludic Proxy,” an ambitious and intermittently successful drama written and directed by Aya Ogawa for the Play Company, takes its title from a particularly contemporary phenomenon: the feeling that we know a place in reality because we have encountered it virtually. (A few years ago, my husband was driving on a Miami causeway for the first time when he realized he knew the route already — from *Grand Theft Auto*.) The play shows how the simulated can adjoin, infuse or ultimately replace the actual.

In the first and strongest section, Nina (Jackie Katzman) slips between her rose-colored Russian girlhood, as she rehearses the part of Nina in Chekhov’s “The Seagull,” and the starker present-day world of Brighton Beach, Brooklyn. As her nephew and his friend play *Call of Duty*, actors create the game’s visuals by using

tiny cameras to film a dollhouse (beautifully conceived by the lighting and video designer Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew).

The video, projected onto the theater's walls, shows Nina's ruined apartment as a scene in the game, a sight that seems to both delight and frighten her. Apparently, she sees it often, privately, in her dreams. (Dreams: the original virtual reality?)

This queasy line between the material and the computer-generated continues through the second and third sections, which redeploy the same actors. The second is a sort of choose-your-own-adventure story of two sisters (Yuki Kawahisa and Saori Tsukada) near postmeltdown Fukushima in Japan. As they talk, occasional prompts appear on the theater's walls:

1) Watch TV

2) Read the newspaper

The audience chooses by holding up paddles as if at an auction. A stage manager in a hazmat suit announces the winning choice, and the scene proceeds accordingly. (That most choices require a small shift in tone rather than any decisive action may explain the muted quality.)

In the third, set in the future, an unspecified disaster has occurred (a throwaway comment about Central Park having become a mass grave suggests it was pretty bad) and what little humanity remains has fled underground. A young woman (Ayesha Jordan), named for Treplev, another character in "The Seagull," spends her days scanning the surface for signs of life while rejecting the "systems install" that would turn her into a cyborg.

Ms. Ogawa, who often works as a translator, has big ideas, both in terms of the writing and how to stage it. Some of her grander schemes, like braiding different narrative strands, don't come off. And often the dialogue and the acting are less than compelling. This may be deliberate. Video game scripts tend toward the familiar and formulaic, and so does a lot of the dialogue here. Often the actorly affect is rather flat, but that's also true of plenty of Xbox content.

If Ms. Ogawa is interested in virtual reality, she's also skeptical of it. In the

third part she even suggests it's carcinogenic. (To be fair, future reality is pretty toxic, too.) "The Seagull" echoes throughout the play and Treplev's cry of "We need new forms!" must have echoed in her mind. Well, with the digital revolution, we have them now. But no matter how elaborate the design or absorbing the action, they will, as Ms. Ogawa's Nina suggests, leave us "always looking for something that is not there."

Ludic Proxy

Category Off Off Broadway, Play

Credits Written and Directed by Aya Ogawa

Cast With Christopher Henry, Ayesha Jordon, Yuki Kawahisa, Jackie Katzman, Megan Stern and Saori Tsukada

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