The Future is 0 Keeps Satire Classy

Review of *The Future is 0* at On the Boards

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*The Future is 0* is an exhilarating night of satirical, refreshing commentary on our current society in the form of a classic game show, hosted by Clay Buff (Claire Buss) and Kat O’Hara (as herself). The show is, in
the words of the hosts, "a battle of mental, physical, & psychological challenges" in which three contestants play a variety of absurd games. The contestants spin a wheel to choose the games, which are previewed with hysterical, Adult Swim style animations designed by Nick Shively, who also runs the booth. Subtly, one of the best parts of the show is the retro synth-pop theme music that plays throughout (and I am currently petitioning for its release onto streaming platforms).

Before the games begin, the main host Clay Buff performs her three-minute opening monologue during which an audience member is picked from the crowd to sit in the "Chuckke Throne." A camera monitors the person's face and will sound an aggressively loud alarm whenever the person isn't actively smiling and laughing. Besides being a hilariously bizarre intro, this establishes a key part of Clay's character. Through her need for constant validation and praise and by forcing this audience member to smile and laugh the whole time we see her dictatorial manner. Her take on the classic game show host was eerie and fantastical and had a hypersensitive performative progressiveness that, while a commentary on our "fauxgressive" society, made her character refreshingly new but simultaneously all too familiar.

After Clay's monologue, the curtain goes up, the Chuckke Throne goes offstage, and the three contestants, who are real Seattle-based artists, are introduced. Games like Ooh Ah Ah Ah (where contestants have to guess songs where all the words except 'ooh' and 'ah' have been removed) allow contestants to have fun and be goofy, further allowing the audience to get to know and connect with them. However, other games like Cancel Me Softly are much more pointedly satirical. In Cancel Me Softly, contestants are given mildly controversial topics (such as police dogs, first-person shooter video games, and rainbow crosswalks), and must vote on whether they
are “yummy” or “stinker”. The audience is encouraged to use their phones to vote as well, and in order to gain a point, the contestant’s answer must align with what the majority of the audience voted for. This game, clearly a commentary on cancel culture, doesn’t allow contestants to have their own opinions, and their winning relies on their sense of what the audience chose. What’s more, the audience might notice the same happening to them. Like many game shows, the audience is given cue card instructions but it isn’t your typical “applause.” One that was used a lot in the Cancel Me Softly game was a cue card that prompted the audience to shout “things are only good or bad” whenever contestants tried to argue about their choice of ‘yummy’ or ‘stinker’, shutting them down when they tried to express their turmoils. While in actuality, the topics they had to vote on are nuanced issues, we are shown how a lot of reality television is made to stage situations in certain ways, ensuing more chaos. The show, while being hilariously insane, interactive, and digestible, was also able to comment on social issues across the board without it feeling forced or in your face, keeping their satire classy.

The Future is 0. Photo by West Smith.

Each contestant, while not necessarily playing a character, had a persona that fit into the overall dynamic of the game. Even crew members like Kat
O’Hara (producer/creator) and Nick Shively (sound booth/graphics-animation) had onstage roles to play which honestly made the show all the better. The show’s production designer Amanda K. Pitsch was perhaps one of the most stellar and understated performances of the night. She is, at first, a Vanna White of sorts, not having much of a role besides showing off the prizes and acting as the score keeper. Wearing shiny gold gloves and a black dress, right in the midst of the competition she leads what is perhaps some of the biggest commentary of the night: the unpaid interns. From the very first skit Clay refers to the stage crew as unpaid, which is an issue that has sparked many a conversation in the past few years. Especially, in the entertainment industry where up-and-comers will do anything to get their name out there including unpaid labor. The deliberate use of the word ‘unpaid’ sets up a wonderful mid-show interlude in which the interns are shown cleaning up during a break, Amanda and the interns complain about Clay being an oppressive ‘girlboss.’ After their speech Amanda wears messages on the back of her jacket with things like, ‘The Future is $0’ but it wouldn’t be a satirical comedy if by the end Clay didn’t offer to pay them back with chips, causing them to forget about the entire issue.

The dynamic, perfectly paced games keep the audience engaged the entire time while also allowing for small pockets of unplanned comedic gold and tons of fun-spirited commentary. For those new to live comedy, such as myself, The Future is 0 is a wonderful way to break into the world.

The Future is 0 played at On the Boards December 2-4, 2021. For more information see here.

Lead photo credit: Jas Keimig, Shannon Perry, and Tomo Nakayama in The Future is 0. Photo by West Smith.
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