

Theatre Reviews

Boxhead

|Glenn Sumi

[Critic's pick]BOXHEAD by Darren O'Donnell (Buddies in Bad Times/Crow's Theatre/Mammalian Diving Reflex). To November 1. Pwyc-\$29. 416-975-8555, artsexy.ca.

Rating: NNNN

About 10 people left during the mid-week performance I saw of [Boxhead], the remount of Darren O'Donnell's funny and thoughtful play. That odd, distracting occurrence made me wonder what those departing people were expecting and didn't find. A traditional play? Strange. In some ways, O'Donnell's play adheres to well-proven dramatic principles. His characters want something and go after it.

A geneticist wakes up one morning with a box on his head. What does he do? He tries to discover who he is. He finds a partner. Then he and his partner – who also has a box on his head – try to procreate. Along the way, the two deal with big issues, like if there's a God and whether there's some purpose and narrative to their lives.

These are profound questions about the human condition. The obvious allegory is the Adam and Eve story, but you can find parallels in any number of works of art, popular and avant-garde.

So why did those people leave? Because the characters had boxes on their heads? Because they spoke, thanks to a remarkable feat of sound design, technical doodads and stage management (not to mention acting), in helium voices?

To be sure, the show worked better at its last venue, Theatre Passe Muraille Mainspace, which with its narrower shape and high ceiling somehow emphasized the music hall, vaudeville feel of the piece – there are lots of old-fashioned physical gestures and tricks involved.

And a show like this is all about timing, which, to be honest, wasn't the best during the performance I saw. (I've since heard that a lot of those wrinkles have been ironed out.)

There's a bit of repetition in the show's final third. But O'Donnell has included up-to-the-minute references to the iPhone, Perez Hilton and other things in our information-saturated world.

But I can't help wondering what those exiting people felt. Did they feel betrayed by art? Were they bored? (How could they be bored?) Should we fear that engrossing, captivating art like this isn't finding an audience?

