

# stage

theatre • dance comedy • performance



Beatriz Pizano (left) and Naomi Campbell hit the street to interview strangers for *Diplomatic Immunities: The End*.

theatre preview

# The End is near

Mammalian Diving Reflex uses interview format to share human fears By JON KAPLAN

**DIPLOMATIC IMMUNITIES: THE END** conceived by Darren O'Donnell, co-directed by O'Donnell and Rebecca Picherack, with Faisal Anwar, Naomi Campbell, Ulysses Castellanos, Misha Glouberman, O'Donnell, Picherack, Tanya Pillay and Beatriz Pizano. Presented by Mammalian Diving Reflex in association with Buddies in Bad Times at Buddies (12 Alexander). Previews begin Sunday (February 11), opens Wednesday (February 14) and runs to February 25, Tuesday-Saturday 8 pm, matinee Sunday 2:30 pm. \$20-\$23, Sunday pwyc, stu/srs/unwaged \$12, previews \$15. 416-975-8555.

I'VE JUST DONE THE MOST UNUSUAL interview of my career.

Not because it was with seven people or because its questions were at times out of left field.

No, the reason is that I was the subject of the interview, not the one asking the questions.

That focus on individual lives and thoughts is central to *Diplomatic Immunities: The End*, Darren O'Donnell's unadorned idea of making ordinary people the subject of his stage piece.

And it's not just audience members. He and his interviewing troupe have scoured the city, knocking on doors

and stopping people on the street to ask about their histories and beliefs and presenting the results in a simple theatrical context. They've been workshopping the idea here and in Calgary for two years.

The result blends storytelling, questionnaires, talk show, audience poll and personal drama, both live and recorded.

The current version focuses on the end — of the world, of one's own life — and what might lie after. It's based, in part, on two weeks of fall interviews that the group did around Toronto.

My 20 minutes, audio- and video-

taped, was actually a comfortable dialogue. Questions included where I was born (Florida), why I came to Canada (the draft), is the world going to end (not in my lifetime), why are there bad people (don't know) and who's the worst person in the Toronto theatre community (no comment).

I was initially worried about giving a wrong or a foolish answer, but there's no pressure by anyone and no "right" response.

And what the experience did, as I look back on it, was break down barriers by making connections between me and the questioners.

"We found that people love to talk about themselves and become fantastically personal," explains producer/interviewer Naomi Campbell after my interview. "But there's no reason for anyone in the audience to be scared; there's no participation required, no bullying or judgment, no danger if you sit in the first row."

"And somehow the whole structure works," says playwright Beatriz Pizano.

"Darren has compared the experience to everyone sitting in his living room talking about life. There's no script, but rather a very in-the-moment interaction for everyone involved."

Pizano admits that the interviewing process, going up to strangers and asking questions, was hard for her.

"As open as I am, stopping someone I didn't know was difficult, but I got better at it. I remember once during Christmas we each went into a different subway car and had to interview one-on-one. The first man I spoke to," she laughs, "thought I was coming on to him."

O'Donnell's already proven in works like *White Mice* and *Boxhead* that he knows how to push the theatrical envelope, combining theatricality, social analysis and philosophical speculation in an arresting fashion.

The idea for *Diplomatic Immunities* grew out of a script O'Donnell had written about encounters with strangers. He and Campbell thought they could pry that idea out of a scripted piece and give it an impromptu life by talking randomly to people on Queen.

"The public presentations that follow the interviews are a kind of debriefing that includes both the facts and our feelings about them," notes Campbell. "We reveal as much about ourselves as the people with whom we speak."

The show we'll see and participate in has some structure but will vary every performance. One woman who saw workshops last year was so taken with the process that she intends to come to the entire run of *Diplomatic Immunities*.

Central to the evening is O'Donnell's concept of social acupuncture.

"It suggests that a little bit of discomfort is required for a release," says Campbell, "just like traditional acupuncture can hurt a bit before blockages are opened. Sure, there's a bit of discomfort in the needling or triggering of some questions, and sometimes you can hear the audience make a group sound that suggests unease. But then people pass through it, and we know a pressure has been released."

"That's when the dynamics between people in the room have changed, something that's probably reflected in the larger world."

© Jonkap@nowtoronto.com



STEVE PAYNE