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Theatre like a carefully woven net

Diplomatic Immunities: The End

★ ★ ★ (out of 4)

Conceived and directed by Darren O'Donnell. Produced by Naomi Campbell. Co-directed by Rebecca Picherack. Until Feb. 25 at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre, 12 Alexander St. 416-975-8555

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THEATRE CRITIC

How often do you get a chance to see live theatre that's really live; created right before your eyes and likely to change every evening?

It's a rare opportunity, but a wonderful one, and the major reason you should try to see *Diplomatic Immunities: The End*, which opened last night at Buddies in Bad Times.

This is the latest work from Mammalian Diving Reflex, a company dedicated to pushing the boundaries of what theatre can do and how it ought to connect more closely with the world we live in.

Years of research and work have led, in this case, to an evening that may seem unstructured but is actually like a carefully woven net: lots of support, but enough loose spaces for the odd spontaneous impulse to slip through.

Darren O'Donnell, Naomi Campbell and their team have gone to every corner of the city, videotaping interviews with



After watching people from all corners of the city answer questions about their lives, it's the audience's turn to share stories onstage and on-camera in a well-planned but spontaneous piece of live theatre.

people. We meet everyone from a self-admitted crack-addict prostitute to the wife of an esteemed diplomat.

Young people, old people, black, white, brown, yellow — it's a real cross-section of our society.

Interviewers ask them questions concerning how they feel about the world in which they live. Many of them are scared, some are angry, a few are even

hopeful. These videos are interspersed with comments from the interviewing teams about the things they happen to remember about their subject on a given night.

Sometimes the comments trip over each other and generate arguments, sometimes there's silence.

It's neither slick and empty, nor formless and dull. It holds you.

then ask selected individuals to step forward and be interviewed on camera, both by the official team as well as the other audience members.

It sounds like a recipe for disaster, an Oprah show gone horribly wrong, but, dammit, it works.

O'Donnell and his people have spun an honest web of meaningful interrogation around the room and people respond to it. The individuals who stepped forward at the preview I attended were neither plants nor friends of the company.

They were ordinary people who became extraordinary in the way they shared the simple, but deeply felt, details of their lives.

A man who took quiet pride in the baking of an apple cake shyly shared his secret ("lots of lemon rind"), while a girl who traced the sad history of her relationship with her "all-controlling" father managed to keep an aesthetic distance from her own life that was admirable.

By the end of the evening, there was a palpable sense of community in the room. The "social acupuncture" that O'Donnell claims his kind of theatre creates had achieved its desired result.

You left the theatre thinking and feeling differently than when you went in and — tell the truth — how often does that happen?

But then, the best part comes when the interviewers turn their attention to the viewing audience. They ask us to either rise or sit in response to a series of seemingly random questions.

"Would you ever eat a bug?" "Have you saved someone's life?" "Would you put your hand down a gopher hole?" "Have you been arrested for something you believe in?"

They judge the answers and