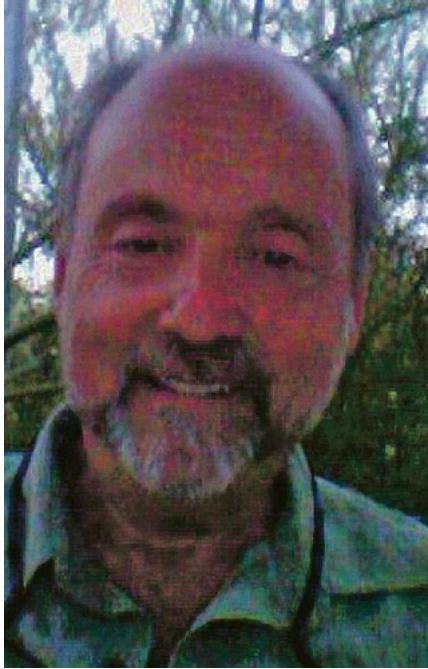


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Reader View: Polaroid stories at the Greer Garson Theater

By Jonathan Back
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Jonathan Back

Santa Fe University of Art and Design pulled out all the stops in February with a compelling production of Naomi Iizuka's tragedy, *Polaroid Stories*. Even the gods would have felt lucky to attend opening night at the Greer Garson Theater. Even though the production is over, it's worth telling you about. The sheer physical beauty of everything, from the pastries to the formal attire, cleverly contrasted with the stark and desperate poverty of the street. In this, and other ways, the audience was teased and confronted, coddled and shocked.

In the play, life stories are told and unwound, revealing their crassness along with their vulnerable underbellies. The author's conceits are many and diverse: gods consort with mortals, mortals have pretend powers, and even hopelessness offers redemption ... even when a lie. Profound themes underlie the conceits: We dare not be comfortably settled, dangers are everywhere. Civilized behavior barely disguises chaos. Reason barely overcomes madness.

Myths by their nature are not made of facts, and yet they are "true" in their depth and recurrence; or rather they are "real" as they pertain to the soul. Iizuka exploits these ambiguities in many ways: Viewers taste disorientation and life's unreliability like vagabonds might. Nothing is as it is, not only not as it should be.

The company, however, doubled down, overlaying this complexity with further symbolism. Fancy cameras roamed the lobby, interviews ran like Hollywood red carpets. Look at us! We are historians, chroniclers, smart and cool. Yet we are also, unmistakably, exhibitionists and voyeurs. Dressing elegantly is "civilized,"

but also hides our inner poverty with gloss. We are fancy, which partly means we are fake. Seducing and seduced with appearance, we are exploiting and exploited. For all the grown-up we look, our confidence must be thin: we are still mostly teenagers. In other words, we are both totally unlike and totally the same as the street-bound hookers, thieves and junkies in the play.

Seated inside, stagecraft took over. The masterful set and lighting seamlessly advanced the contradictions: gritty naturalism met trompe l'oeil depths and heights. Ancient columns and multiple portals met futurist dystopias. Thanks to precise collaboration, characters unnerved one another without being seen, and the superb Ariadne literally walked into heaven and became the stars. Breathtaking.

Costumes, tattered and elegant, bore iconic elements for each character's broken pride. His crown, amulet and dagger, her music box and silver thread. Echo's nothingness. Philomel vomits blood streamers woven into her gown. Subtlety was overpowering, superior to the usual grotesque clobbering. Likewise the sound. The dripping well, sirens spinning, subway rattling beneath; all hushed by surreal otherworldiness. Terrible violence occurred, but for ears only. Thunder rumbled, threatening these poor creatures with pneumonia; but only trained altruists would sympathize.

The literal and figurative were disguised as one another, confusing depression with arrogance, courage with bravado. We could not even trust what was already false. It was like cinema flashbacks that did not happen. We knew the whole enterprise was fabricated, yet deception rankled us. We relied on the form of revelation, as these characters did, but over and again life fails us.

Rare, there were no weak links in this accomplished ensemble. Everyone's superlative acting talent burned, and the marks of expert direction (from choreography to elocution) have pressed into these young performers. They will remain impressed. Delivering theater more powerfully than it's written predicts their future greatness.

This university revived *Polaroid Stories* into the present moment. A play — or truth, or myth, or fantasy? Or is it the ancient past or the future? Exactly.

Jonathan Back is new to Santa Fe and a teacher at the Turquoise Trail Charter School. Heathers: The Musical is being performed now at the Santa Fe University of Art and Design, with performances this evening and again April 29-May 1.