
PERFORMANCE REVIEW

Judith A. Sebesta, Editor

CONTINUOUS CITY. By Harry Sinclair. Directed by Marianne Weems. The Builders Association, Novellus Theater at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco. 8 November 2008.

Continuous City is the story of four lives simultaneously connected and disconnected through technology. In a sense, it is a morality play, complete with an Everyman character, for the high-tech global age. An ambitious work dramatizing our world linked by teleconferencing, social networking, and other place-spanning technology, it is a complex cautionary tale about virtual proximity at the cost of face-to-face interaction. As lines between business/family roles, real/virtual, and public/private places become blurred, the bonds between the characters are stretched to the breaking point.

The play follows the networked lives of Mike, a father and businessman; his boss/partner J.V.; and Mike's young daughter Sam and her nanny Deb who function as the nodes in this social web. Of the four central characters, three occur as live, co-present performers, while the pivotal character, Mike, is seen only through his video image—thus he is physically absent. As a morality play, *Continuous City* involves not only the changing relationship of characters to each other, but also their symbolic relation to technology.

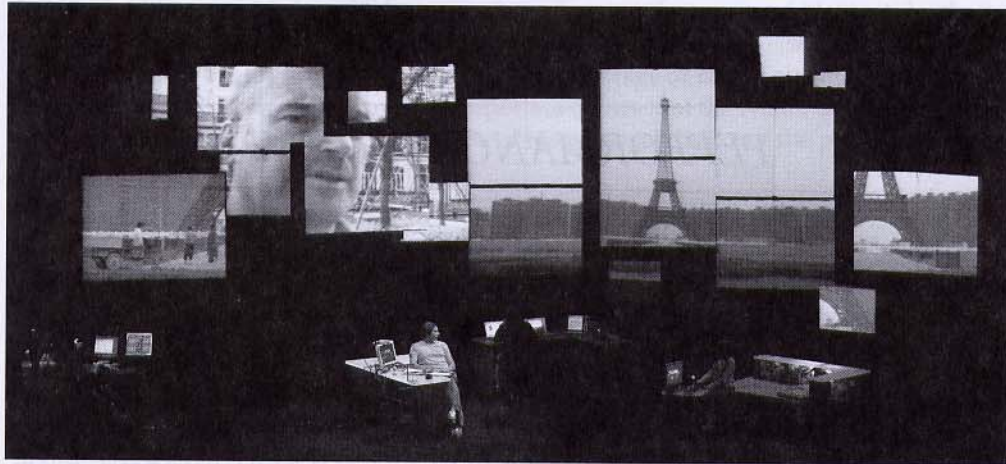
Deb, the nanny played by Moe Angelos as a cartoonishly cheerful woman reminiscent of a soubrette, has recently adopted social-networking technology. Her coping mechanism for moving to a new city is to blog about San Francisco's cable-car houses, medical marijuana, and the micro-cultures of Mission and Castro streets (the script changes to suit each location in which it is produced). Initially, Deb seems more interested in her blog than in her young charge; she seems unwilling or unable to connect with the girl. Deb tries to keep Sam from reading her blog by insisting that it is private, to which the girl accurately responds: "How can it be

private? If it's on the Internet, everyone can see it." Eventually Deb understands Sam's point, sees the girl's need for direct interaction, and involves her in the blog and in life. A shared interest in technology brings them together.

J.V., played by Rizwan Mirza, is a driven entrepreneur bordering on one-dimensional villain. His belief in his social-networking product has replaced his need for nonmediated interpersonal contact. His company's humanistic goal of connecting families all over the globe is belied by Mike, who works to the point of exhaustion, thus threatening the stability of his family. For J.V., the online community of Xubu is home, and he sees no need for face-to-face meetings. At one point, we watch him try to multitask, wooing seven different women online at once, but unable to meet any of them in person. He is a worst-case scenario of a man whose personal life borders on a pathological cyber-xenophobia. In his bid to win the race of global connectivity, he has completely lost the ability to connect to others as human beings.

The girl, Sam (Olivia Timothee), is precocious, tech-savvy, and lonely. The young actress was compelling; onstage in the dark, clearly waiting for someone, she carried the current of human urgency that underlies the play and drives much of the action. Sam has mastered so many new technologies that she is easily bored and begins to act out by leaving school and refusing to communicate with spoken words, using only text-messaging to communicate. Ultimately, our concern lies more with the survival of the family than the business, because we feel for this innocent—a symbol of the developing future generation.

Sam's father, Mike (played by Harry Sinclair), a traveling businessman (and very complex character), is undergoing a significant transformation from detached to engaged father. In a sense, he is a modern Everyman, torn between work and family, between the promise of virtual connectivity and real connection. In perhaps the most compelling moment



Harry Sinclair (Mike, onscreen), Rizwan Mirza (J.V.), and Olivia Timothee (Sam) in *Continuous City*.
(Photo: Eamon Lochte-Phelps.)

of the production, Mike calls his daughter from the road. The audience sees a blur of lights wash across the screens: rain, strange signs, and people passing. After a few moments, we realize that Mike is in the backseat of a cab in a foreign metropolis. The contrast between the little girl safe at home in bed and her father in a city cab crystallized a moment of realization about the fragility of the boundaries between private and public spaces and the sense of danger when they merge together, contaminating each other. As Mike watches his daughter drift off to sleep, a shift occurs and there is a sense of restored peace as the girl's sleeping face bathed in warm color washes across the entire set, indicating a shared sunset in their personal world. Later, father and daughter go on a virtual play-date: an outing in South America (where they visit a market, pick



Olivia Timothee (Sam) in *Continuous City*.
(Photo: Eamon Lochte-Phelps.)

out sprinkled doughnuts, and play hide-and-seek in a park). The familial bond between father and daughter is strengthened through these virtual interactions, at the same time as the business bond between Mike and J.V. fails.

Technically the production was near-perfect. The integration of video and live action (video design by Peter Flaherty; technical design by Joe Silovsky) was aided by a system of fourteen poles with multiple pneumatically triggered screens that were almost invisible until they sprang open, allowing images to pop up at a moment's notice. The screens became a primary place of action and interaction. Throughout, place was transformed, as Mike journeyed to emerging markets in places such as Africa, China, and South America, hyperreal nonplaces such as Las Vegas's versions of New York and Venice, and the interstitial spaces of transit that compose the *Continuous City*.

Through the inclusion of real-time video conferencing with non-actor participants across the globe, the audience gained a sense of the possibilities of cyber-community. Video-feeds chronicled diverse responses to the prompt, "When I think of home, I think of . . ." At one point, as many as thirty-two screens flashed open with personal accounts of belonging and longing for the connections of homeplaces. The audience clearly received the message of this cyber morality play. As I left my seat, I paused to overhear people discussing their own accounts of how technology both isolates us and brings us together.

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