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What to Throw Away, What to Keep

by Patricia Milder

How can it be? You can sit captive and captivated, wondering, “where is this all going?”—really feeling on the edge of something, as if driving a car through the fog on some unfamiliar, unlighted road. And then, even with a grand and bloody payoff, still, like some magical negation of the last hour or so, you are sent right back to the beginning, where there was never any promise of clarity, anyway.

How can it be that one performance can be all three: semi-autobiographical stream of consciousness, navel gazing didacticism, riveting?

One of the first things that Ivo Dimchev said to the Dixon Place audience at the Performance Mix Festival in April was, “Enjoy the waste.” (Referring, of course, to time in the form of art, which he also repeatedly ordered us to respect, sort of: “Respect art! If you don’t, that’s okay.”)

The contradictory internal dialogue that Dimchev gives voice to—speaking sometimes *at* and other times *to* those seated in front of him—and which changes for every performance of *Som Faves*, seems to be tinted, in different sections, different shades of true. Not that it matters: repetitive ramblings about his mother or his sister or his ex-boyfriend are emotional lifelines that, in their ordinariness, ground this strange and special strain of physical theater.

Two things I will always have a visceral reaction to seeing onstage: self-inflicted bleeding and misogyny. One was the climax of the show, and seemed generally well received due to a certain sad beauty; the other crept in, underlying certain moments, perhaps critically (I add generously) or intentionally (I assume, or maybe hope). Can it be desirable to listen to a man—one experienced with performing in drag—speak about the relationship between the audience and the clitoris, and then later spit all over a porcelain cat? Maybe. The tossed off reference to his sister’s pregnancy was equally grotesque, with sublime intentions.

Sublimity, according to Kant, “is not a quality residing in the object, but a state of mind awakened by an object.”* Since live performance inspires as individual and foreign a state of mind as an encounter with an art object, it’s easy to make a step toward the idea that Dimchev’s manic actions, which are studded with extremes in anti-social behavior, could be transformed through our reception of them, into what we can conceive of as beauty.

The stage itself was practically empty when he walked out in his messy blond wig, tight-fitting slacks, and long-sleeved button-up shirt. He sat at a keyboard, which was set atop a small table

barely bigger than the mini keyboard itself. Next to the artist sat the shiny and still white kitty, and behind him, on the wall, a small painting of two white women made up mostly of blues and yellows.

Dimchev played a man with many faces. Some of these faces seemed about to explode from the pressure underneath his skin; none of his threads of thought quite made it all the way to cohesive individual meaning. But he repeated them enough times that the repetition itself created a familiarity with the strange texts he jumped between. Once slowly and clearly, and then once literally hopping from side to side and wildly gesturing, he recited the entire text of Kenny Rogers's "The Gambler," which includes these lines:

You got to know when to hold 'em, know when to fold 'em,
Know when to walk away and know when to run.
You never count your money when you're sittin' at the table.
There'll be time enough for countin' when the dealin's done.
Now every gambler knows that the secret to survivin'
Is knowin' what to throw away and knowing what to keep.
'Cause ev'ry hand's a winner and ev'ry hand's a loser.
And the best that you can hope for is to die in your sleep.

He framed his interest in this song by explaining that Kenny Rogers was a fat American singer, which he segued into by bringing up Mariah Carey, who he also said was a fat American singer. Such were the insignificant surface-level connections that brought Dimchev from bit to bit over this weirdly jumpy hour or so. It would be near impossible to make sense of his personal constellation of interests—he picks different choices from one hundred of his favorite themes for each performance—but the confusion is attractive. Who really understands her own mind and the connections and preferences living inside and jostling for attention, changing, relating or not relating to each other? Where I think we meet Dimchev is not only through his interests, which are clearly centered around himself and art, but also through this depiction of how the world and our minds really are: contradictory, unclear, sometimes hostile—and full of longing.
