

Behold A Trojan Horse: The Cataract's Clear Vision Stalks Off-Broadway

By Sally Oswald
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For a writer/director team whose first collaboration was staged over twelve hours in a grove of trees and had an audience of speeding drivers, a show opening Off-Broadway isn't too shabby. Writer Lisa D'Amour and director Katie Pearl met in Austin, Texas in 1996 when the two were independently pursuing site-specific theater. D'Amour's new play, *The Cataract* continues at The Women's Project through April 15 and tells the story of two enigmatic Southerners who rent a room from a stalwart Minneapolis couple, and the week's worth of simple routine that reveals hidden yearnings in all of them. The *Cataract* of the title provides work for the men, pride for the city, and incipient danger when it describes the mighty urges of human beings in the throes of self-discovery.

This year marks the pair's tenth as collaborators, and *The Cataract*, a stylized four-hander for proscenium arch, is a long way from the grove of trees (or the multi-part gallery installations where the audience visited activity stations). On the surface of that chronology, from installation to Off-Broadway, one might wonder whether the projects have gotten more conservative. Rather, D'Amour and Pearl have figured something out about how to innovate artistically, while surviving financially over ten years, an Obie, and a handful of high-profile grants. D'Amour's Off-Broadway debut continues a trend of new infusion of downtown talent into the Off-Broadway scene. Perhaps the programming of the whole artist like a Lisa D'Amour, a Charles Mee, or a Pavol Liska is the beginning of something more—an increased value placed on experimental street-cred and stylistically challenging new plays.

But explaining this new work often takes time. "People say it's like Robert Wilson just because it's stylized," D'Amour reports, describing the challenge of explaining the rhythm she's written into the new play. *The Cataract* frames a world where silence is as vital as language and the dialogue's syncopation must be observed to sustain the pulse of the drama. "The words of this play are deceptively simple, stilted even," D'Amour writes in the play's introduction. "The style of the dialogue serves to strip the characters' world of the clutter of realism," which the writer punctuates with scripted pauses and silences, "a system of silent communication" that lives in directed gaze and gesture. Stylization is the key into a more controlled use of empathy, "It's not stylized so we can have ironic distance or make some commentary. It's stylized [to] expose emotional realities."

D'Amour's inspiration for this approach is the rigorously stylized Japanese Noh theater, "where the choreography is so central to the dramatic arc, it's the audience's visual experience." Director Pearl finds dynamism in D'Amour's scoring, "I want the audience to see the looks in the order they appear on the page." The effect, Pearl says, will be "control on the outside and freedom on the inside," much like the doll house setting the script describes. D'Amour is after a world "sliced open," and the phrase has become a bit of a mantra. Pearl extends the metaphor to the acting style, wishing even the actors could be sliced open to reveal the rush of emotions under the surface of their characters. D'Amour's writing reaches a new "strength" with *The Cataract*, Pearl says, citing the play's snares of desire and need. Pearl sees the strength in the "psychic connection between the characters," that ties a still moment in one part of the stage to trigger movement in another.

It's clear that any comparison with Wilson is impossible for the New Orleans native and ex-drill team queen. D'Amour's plays, including the collaborations with Pearl, fly closer to the earth and work elementally. She has a rare ability to reconfigure the theatrical event while keeping lines of communication open between the performers, the production, and the audience. *The Cataract* began merely from a desire to write something pared down, after language-driven plays like *16 Spells To Charm The Beast* and *Anna Bella Eema*. The playwright had taken to wandering by her then-obsession, Minneapolis' Stone Arch Bridge, a relic from the Industrial Age. "I was feeling like a melancholy poet," D'Amour says with a smile, "and feeling like the Southerner who talks too loud and gets to the party too late." She saw differences of North and South in herself and her new city and in the bridge spanning that storied North/South artery, the Mississippi River. From this, her writing became site-specific in a whole new way, building a play that was a site itself with a distinct internal architecture.

From the start, both Pearl and D'Amour's attraction to place and space had been organic. The site-specific work in Austin grew, in part, from a series of parties Pearl had hosted that featured activity stations for her guests. "The vibe in Austin at that time," D'Amour explains, "was that putting together a play was like organizing a party. It's what people did in their spare time." Already a career director, Pearl had found her Austin theater legs when she drove by someone taking a nap in a grove of trees. "I would have never noticed that grove of trees. It's the kind of thing you drive right by. But I noticed the trees when I saw the person in the trees." The tableau-based piece she created was a challenge to replicate that experience; "how do you put something in the grove that makes you see the grove itself." Pearl's instincts about making places of performance integral to the show's content proved vital to her next series of projects.

An invitation from Frontera Fest @ Hyde Park Theatre provided the occasion for the pair to begin working together. They spent three weeks in an empty boutique space Pearl had scouted out, rearranging D'Amour's research on birds, eyes, and visual tricks. A character emerged, the blue dress lady, around whom they created a play that functioned more like a scripted cult museum than a dialogue-based play. "After that it was kind of cemented" Pearl recalls of the working relationship. But the co-authorship of the Frontera Fest piece, called *Dress Me Blue/Window Me Sky*, gave way to new roles. Pearl would

go on to direct D'Amour in Slabber, another site-specific performance that featured a collection of relics, an audio-guide, and a book of lists. Later, D'Amour directed Pearl in Limo and Nita & Zita, the play for which they won an Obie.

The new production of The Cataract at The Women's Project epitomizes the body of work D'Amour and Pearl have built together, but in portable form, the perfect Trojan Horse. Inside the frame of the Off-Broadway play is evidence of the D'Amour/Pearl touch, a site-specific play that can go on the road and uses stylization to new effect. With The Cataract, the acclaimed team gets the attention they deserve and not a moment too late.

The Cataract continues at The Women's Project, 424 W. 55th St., Manhattan thru April 15. Wed-Fri., 8pm; Sat., 2pm & 8pm; Sun., 3pm. Added Performance: Wed., April 12 @ 2pm; There is no matinee on Sun., April 2. \$52. 212.757.3900. www.womensproject.org. Tickets available thru Telecharge.