

LOVE AND LANGUAGE

The Very Little Theatre presents The Language Archive

“I don’t understand what you are trying to say. I have never understood anything you are trying to say,” says George, the protagonist of *The Language Archive*.

Can you love language but have no words for love? George is a passionate linguist but a passive spouse. He cannot express his love for Mary. She, in turn, hides odd little poems about her unhappiness and then denies ever writing them, such as, “Husband or throw pillow? Wife or hot-water bottle? Marriage or an old cardigan? Love or explaining how to use the remote control?”

The Language Archive, by Julia Cho, is a play about how we communicate, or don’t communicate. The love triangle doesn’t feel old when it is wrapped in such a lovely blanket of beautiful language. Running through the script are several languages, both real and imaginary, including Esperanto. Imagined in the late 19th century in the face of growing nationalism and anti-Semitism, Esperanto creator L.L. Zamenhof wanted the world to have a langue of peace and understanding. Literally translated, Esperanto means “one who hopes.”

Never a pinball-paced script to begin with, director James Aday’s production is unabashedly languid. Beautifully choreographed movement plays against the careful words of the script, producing a ballet-like



ACHILLES MASSAHOS, CHRISTIANA DANCER, LLOYD BRASS AND NANCY HOPPS

JOHN BAUGUESS

experience for the audience. It is an intentionally slow and thoughtful production.

The play juxtaposes the surreal with the mundane, such as when one character interrupts another’s soliloquy to the audience to remind him that she can hear everything he’s telling us. Production elements mirror this playful mix, like real books piling up and spilling over in front of the stylized books painted on the walls of the set, and glorious loaves of bread that you can see and smell.

The Language Archive is more quirky than emotional, so the interest lies in the characterization. Cho could have built more tension into her play. And because the script doesn’t hand out an attention-grabbing plotline, it’s on the actors to pull us in; they pull it off most of the time.

Kari Welch is a precise and gripping Mary. Lloyd Brass

has an otherworldly George, bewildered and sad. While the rest of the characters luxuriate in words, the emotional power comes from the delightful Alta (Nancy Hopps) and Resten (Achilles Massahos), the last two souls who know Elloway; it’s a dying language they refuse to speak, as they prefer to argue in English.

It’s interesting to note that *Tribes*, another play about the power of language and love, is running currently at Oregon Contemporary Theatre, extending to Feb. 8. This gray weather blanketing our community is perfect for contemplation, and we have a unique opportunity to look at language from various angles in these two different productions. Cho’s question can hold us all in wonder, “What is language if not an act of faith?” ■

The Language Archive runs through Feb. 1 at the Very Little Theatre; \$12-\$17.

COMEDY BY ALEX NOTMAN

THANK DOG FOR MIKE BIRBIGLIA

The comedian behind *Sleepwalk With Me* makes his second stop in Eugene

Birbiglia became the poster boy for REM (rapid eye movement) behavior disorder and self-deprecating laughs after cataloging his slumbering escapades (like jumping through a second-story window) in *Sleepwalk With Me*. Now, Birbiglia is on a 100-city tour — his biggest yet — for the new comedy special *Thank God for Jokes*; he’s still making the everyday hilarious, e.g., kissing is *weird* when you really think about it. *EW* caught up with the comedian on the road.

What’s on your mind today?

I’m riding with my brother Joe from East Lansing, Mich., to Royal Oak, Mich. These days it’s all about weather.com. It’s about the new show, so that every night is great and making sure I show up to the show. In East Lansing, there was a gym affiliated [with the hotel] — it had a bar-restaurant in the middle. Yesterday I ate chicken fingers and watched people play sports.

Last time I performed in Eugene was in the public library when my book came out, *Sleepwalk with Me: and Other Painfully True Stories*. I was invited by the Eugene Public Library to perform. No one else had asked me to perform in Eugene. It was fun. I got a shushing ovation.

Your brother drives you to your tour stops?

He’s coming to Eugene. He comes on a lot of the tour dates. We’ve been working together for about 10 years. He writes with me. He’s a producer. He introduced me to comedy when I was younger. He took me to Steven Wright.

I was listening to This American Life’s “Good Guys” episode on the radio the other night. In your segment, you talk about taking public transport. Do you take

public transport a lot? Do you get a lot of material from that?

I take the subway in New York constantly, which I love. I love the subway. My grandfather was an electrician on the subway in the ’30s ... It’s good people-watching. You can’t



get much material on the subway; you can get more material on the bus. [The subway] is not as relatable. I love public transportation. I like that I’m at the point in my career where I go around the country, people go out to see me, the shows are really fun, people get my albums and stuff, but I’m not well known enough that it prohibits me from doing anything. Mike Birbiglia is *good* on the subway.

You’ve done a lot with This American Life. How did you get involved?

I started doing stories for *The Moth*. I would do stories for them and then I told the sleepwalking story. I asked if they would send it to *This American Life*. They sent it along. I didn’t want it to be a live segment but Ira [Glass] was convinced that it would be a good live segment. We emailed back and forth. Finally he called me: “Hey Mike, it’s Ira Glass. I’m calling to convince you to let us use your live [*Moth*] audio on the show.” He’s got such a powerful and influential radio voice. It’s even more powerful on the phone — that star-power phone call ability. We got along on the phone and we’ve kind of been friends ever since.

So you’ve just kicked off a 100-city tour for Thank God for Jokes. Is this your biggest tour yet?

This is by far the biggest tour I’ve ever done. My last tour was about 70 cities. They’re inventing cities for this tour.

I’ve read that you’re working on a screenplay for My Girlfriend’s Boyfriend and that it might be made into a movie or a TV show. What’s going on?

People keep suggesting that it should be a TV show. I don’t want it to be a TV show ... I’m writing another screenplay simultaneously.

What’s the other screenplay going to be about?

No, I don’t want to talk about it. I don’t want it to get out there. [Laughs.]

Mike Birbiglia’s Thank God for Jokes tour comes to Eugene 7:30 pm Saturday, Jan. 25, at the McDonald Theatre; \$25-\$35. Q&A edited for clarity and length.