

show listings: plays

Self at Hand

THEATRE

[Dixon Place](#)

OPENED

June 3, 2005

CLOSED

June 11, 2005

PERFORMANCES

Fri - Sat at 8pm

RUNNING TIME

1 hour, 25 minutes

TICKETS

\$10 - \$12

212-219-0736

CAST

Cary Curran, Thom Sibbitt,
Christopher Eaves

AUTHOR

Jack Hanley

DIRECTOR

Christopher Eaves

COSTUMES

Nathalia Baca & Gary Baura

SOUND

Christopher Eaves & Joshua
Coleman

VIDEO

Christopher Eaves

ADDITIONAL VOICE

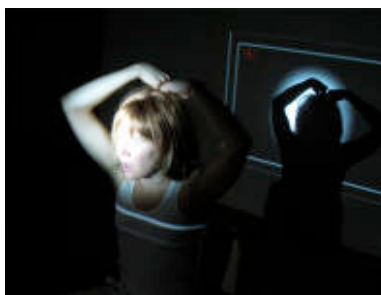
Natalie Ferrier

STYLING & SPECIAL

EFFECTS

Gary Baura

Cary Curran in a scene from *Self at Hand* (photo © Christopher Eaves)



Self at Hand is a play in three modules, written by poet Jack Hanley and directed by experimental theatre artist Christopher Eaves. It's described as "a post-tragic trilogy" set in the future, in a time "when androids can be distinguished from humans only by the taste of their flesh, when celebrities are federally regulated, and when corpses are artificially animated for their funeral." The show utilizes video projection as the only source of stage lighting--the video illuminates the actors and also casts the stage décor and forms metaphorical undertones of the dramatic narrative.

nytheatre.com review

Martin Denton · June 3, 2005

Very rarely, I get to see something in the theatre that is so wildly inventive and interesting, so challenging, and so different from anything I've ever seen before, that as I sit down to write about it I think (1) I am so lucky to have discovered this and (2) how the heck am I going to explain it? A quandary to be desired, believe me.

So here I am trying to write about *Self at Hand*, which fits the above description perfectly. This stimulating and preternaturally vivid multimedia performance work is the creation of poet Jack Hanley, who wrote the startling, provocative text, and Christopher Eaves, who directed and designed it. Eaves's contribution must not be downplayed, for one of the most exciting things about *Self at Hand* is its presentational concept, which is that all of the light on stage comes from video (also by Eaves) projected onto the stage—onto a white wall behind the performers and, almost always, onto the performers themselves. It sounds like it could be gimmicky but it resolutely is not: it's a valid and compelling way of making us see what's happening in this play; it's also quite beautiful most of the time, and essential.

The play itself unfolds in three parts. The first is the most abstract; it's called "The Myth of Not to Be" and is a brief tale of a six-year-old boy at his father's funeral, coping with mixed feelings of

loss and anticipation. Hanley's text feels like a poem instead of a play here, and the intention seems more to evoke the futuristic world where the rest of *Self at Hand* takes place rather than to tell a concrete story. What we understand from the words and images is that technology has merged with humanity in ways that at once seem alien and inevitable: the body at the funeral will be made to stand up and speak; people talk to each other remotely via devices implanted under the skin.

"Tastes Like Robot" fleshes out this not-so-fantastical future and also begins investigation into the principal theme of *Self at Hand*, which is how we may truly comprehend our humanity in an age where it seems destined to drift away from us. In this module, a young man talks about an experiment he conducted on himself in order to validate whether he's a real human being or an android. It's the stuff of pulpy horror/sci-fi, but it takes on a gravity because the problem is so compelling to this fellow, whose actual authenticity as a person remains in doubt, all evidence proffered one way or the other notwithstanding.

And then, in the main event of the evening, we meet a woman who wants to know and feel and understand herself so much that she decides to have a transparent plate installed in her skull, so that she can watch her brain. When that's not enough to satisfy her curiosity about herself, she pries it off and initiates a hands-on investigation, poking and prodding around her synapses and neurons with first one finger and then, eventually, both hands. It's awful and awesome. The comic possibilities of such a venture are tossed around a bit, as when she brings herself to orgasm by squeezing just the right spot up there. So are the cosmic ones: the ending—the only one possible—reminds us that there are some things we cannot, must not, find out.

Hanley's language—direct and straightforward yet weirdly lyrical—tackles the gruesome preoccupations of these characters head-on, while Eaves's subtle, playful staging both defuses and comments on the events depicted. For example, the brain manipulations are all presented in silhouette, performer Cary Curran's fingers working like shadow puppets against the white screen to let us conjure in our mind's eye the unthinkable thing she's doing to herself, only to emerge every so often covered with stage blood. The final moments of "Tastes Like Robot" find actor Thom Sibbitt, as the man-or-android so bent on finding out what he really is, disappearing right before our eyes into an eerie background of videotaped white noise.

The places that Hanley takes us in this play are extraordinary: he thinks things I can't imagine myself ever thinking, and I love that he makes his audience confront constructs and concepts that are in no way obvious or natural. The visualizations that Eaves provides make the journey accessible and palpable; a lot of what he does here is to create analogs in our own experience for the far-out notions that Hanley comes up with, all with deft economy. So we grasp right away how things "work" in the strange universe of *Self at Hand*, from the levitating corpse that floats by the little boy in the very first module to the interactive live video therapy sessions that punctuate the third one. These collaborators really do conjure a brand new world for us to inhabit for a while. It makes for an intense theatrical experience.

Curran, Sibbitt, and (briefly, as the little boy) Eaves do remarkable work performing *Self at Hand*; Curran in particular vividly manages the changes in her character's mental and physical state as her brain manipulations proceed, transforming herself into different versions of this self-destructing woman without changing costume or makeup. The physical environment apart from Eaves's videos is stunning, including an evocative soundscape by Joshua Coleman and Eaves; simple, spare wardrobe by Nathalia Baca and Gary Baura; and styling and special effects by Baura.

This is an affecting, compelling, and entirely original work of theatre: its determination to push beyond familiar paradigms of what stories can be about and how they can be told on stage marks it as profoundly innovative and potentially important. I can't wait to see where Hanley and Eaves decide to take us next.

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