

Performance Review: *Sweet and Lucky* by Third Rail Projects/The Denver Center

May 17, 2016 - August 7, 2016

Director: Zach Morris

The Brooklyn-based theatre company Third Rail Projects presented their immersive production *Sweet and Lucky* and with them they brought their unique and enchanting style of staging and storytelling. Following the trend in immersive theatre, the production was constructed inside a disused and cavernous warehouse space in an industrial district in downtown Denver, Colorado. The set was richly furnished with memory-evoking antiques eloquently scattered imbuing the rambling space with the aroma of profound nostalgia. *Sweet and Lucky* invites its audience to follow the footsteps of interactive characters through the twists and turns of a realistically tragic love story, one enfolded in a dream-like trance of metaphor and dance that questions the reliability of our own memories.

Upon entering the warehouse lobby without a paper copy of a ticket, I was asked to check in at podium with a guest list, a gesture that invited this participant/spectator into the world of the play making me feel as if I belonged. After leaving my personal items at the coat check, I was then escorted into an elaborately decorated “pawn shop” designed in a neo-noire speakeasy aesthetic. Branching off the main hallway were rooms filled with knick-knacks—scribbled postcards, faded photographs, slide negatives and seemingly random objects that would come into play later in the performance: shattered Christmas ornaments, scattered stems of rosemary and lavender. This liminal space was designed to be entirely free-roaming for the audience, allowing the participant/spectators brief moments of immersion in the narrative’s worldview. In this space the audience members were encouraged to wander to the bar for a custom cocktail (rosemary and lavender again) and explore at will, dipping their toes into the world of the play before being exposed to its full narrative.

Without warning, a woman dressed in a simple 1950’s style dress casually entered the room where I was rifling through desk drawers, drinking in the freedom of this alternative form of audience engagement. She smiled before telling us that “these things happen.” Her solemn tone—despite the smile—shifted my initial thrill of exploration into

a feeling of sorrow for something I could not name (nostalgia?). As the woman handed out copies of a hymn and black umbrellas to the audience, it became obvious to me, as a minister's daughter, that I had stumbled into the wake of a funeral; I couldn't help but wonder if the spectators around me had picked up on the tragic clues. The actress then asked us if we were prepared, and before opening a door and leading us out into the open space of the performance, she took a moment to wrap a black shawl over my shoulders—making me feel intimately cared for.



Photo Credit: Adams Visual Communications by DCPA Press

We were led into a cavernous space whose floor had been transformed into a grassy lawn. Under dim lighting a casket was prominently displayed, and as a swarm of black umbrellas filed into the funeral setting. The audience—for the first time—was brought together as a group and invited to sing our designated hymn together in the (real) pouring rain. I was taken aback by both the immediate visceral shock of the water and the emotional connection created within the participants/spectators. We glanced at each other in wonder and whispered predictions back and forth, and as the second verse commenced, the rain subsided and audience members were led away by various actors.

These actors would become characters embodying a narrative which asked us to engage in affective moments of longing, loss and forgotten memories.

We were directed through a dream-like journey where characters danced on desks, and we spied upon characters through windows, gathered backstory through spliced images of a projected film from the back of a pick-up truck, and performed a game of memory with photographs littered throughout the intricately designed set. Though intimate, each of these moments was prescriptively (and meticulously) timed by the production, which had the effect of breaking the immersion, rushing us through the various experiences. As soon as a moment was completed, I was ushered by a stagehand to enter the next—forbidden to explore any further on my own—limiting the impact of each experience. What had begun as an exploratory adventure into a nostalgic world soon transformed into a somewhat calculated parade through fragmented chapters of a story, whose sequence felt imposed, based on the group to which I had been designated, as opposed to an effort at creating a sense of cohesive clarity.



Photo Credit: Adams Visual Communications by DCPA Press

At the heart of the narrative were two lovers, who, for some inexplicable reason, failed in romance and togetherness. At one point I was invited into their house for Christmas dinner and witnessed the unfolding of the fight that led to their break up. The story, despite the apparent disorder, began to make some kind of sense to me. Finally, I found the same woman who left her husband, in a wheelchair, lost in confusion as she tried to remember her own story. As a way of bringing the experience to a close, the entire audience was led back to the funeral we had been a part of at the beginning; here we said goodbye to the actors and each other by raising our own voices in a final verse of the initial hymn. As we did so, each character entered the crowd to join in with their own rendition of the hymn.

As a whole, *Sweet and Lucky* left me feeling nostalgic, my eyes filled with tears, surrounded by the community formed by this dream we had lost, yet, in which we had found each other. As an epilogue to the performance, the audience was directed into a neighboring room that had been converted into a bar room, and here we were invited to discuss the experience we had just shared. Intimate, daring, confusing and emotional, *Sweet and Lucky* is not a show I will ever be able to forget.

In an attempt to embrace the trend of immersive style theatre, Third Rail Projects invites its audience into a memory-driven world. Though emotionally moving and incredibly evocative, nevertheless I found this production frustrating in parts due to the prescriptive way I was guided from one location/scene to the next. There had been spaces I wanted to explore that I had been prevented from lingering in, characters I had desired to speak with where I had not been allotted a voice. The problematic nature of the production seemed to be a lack of sufficient agency allowed with the audience—as if the actors did not truly trust the audience. One example is that from the beginning we were asked to not open doors until they were opened for us, and not to speak unless we were spoken to, all of which felt limiting to an audience who desired to wander and discover at will. Though labeled immersive theatre, I would argue that this production falls more into the category of promenade theatre, as every turning point, every scene change, every interaction, every experience had been meticulously choreographed, pre-planned and pre-determined. I found myself wondering what my perception may have been, had I been offered the liberty to make those decisions in the space *myself*. After seeing the

production twice and attempting to explore different storylines, it became obvious that there was a finite number of possible experiences to be had. Despite my personal yearning for more individual agency, I found the set to be intricately designed, the actors to be believable, yet ultimately I was left wanting more from the narrative and the immersive experience itself.