

The Plays of C.J. Hopkins – Chat as Ritual

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By Kirk Wood Bromley

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There is something strangely invigorating about the plays of CJ Hopkins. More abstract than Shepard, more concrete than Mamet, both with whom he shares a love of hard, fast, interstitial language, Hopkins' dialogue casually exacts a world of tense and crazy beings reaching desperately, ambivalently for...what? The answer sits in the audience.

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A precious chance to be in that audience is arriving this spring at The Present Company's Theatorium. <I>A Place Like This</I>, written and directed by Hopkins, is described unflinchingly in its press material as "an irreverently devout meditation on the state of the American theater and the society it reflects. Without characters to inhabit and with only the shreds of a story to work with, a large ensemble of players on a bare bones set tries to get to the heart of certain questions...why have people gathered in theaters since the dawn of civilization? Why do we still? What is the unique, social and spiritual experience that theater alone is capable of offering us, that film, television, and other performance media cannot?" No small goal for no small mind.

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Hopkins describes his plays, rife with apologetics for all nostalgic innuendo, as ritual. Like political meetings, church gatherings, and social ceremonies, his texts attempt to ritualize what he terms "our current late-stage capitalist society." The theater to Hopkins is a collectivizing locale, a connecting epicenter of information and power, a conscious/unconscious plug-in site, where the audience feels something happen and leaves burdened with the anticipation of discovering, upon reflection, what it was.

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In other words, Hopkins wants to involve us in a search. "My biggest investment is not in the writing. It's in making a different kind of theater. Capital has decoded, deconstructed, freed us. But what is next? My plays seek that next." Due to this ambiguous objective, Hopkins' plays are both philosophic and chatty, quotidian and political, mystic and mundane. In the guts of his characters is a vitriolic disgust for all that is commodified, nebulous, inauthentic, yet from their mouths emerge the regular rappings of bored, post-Marxist humans, leaving use to endlessly ask, "what got caught in their throats?"

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For instance, in <I>A Place Like This</I>, seven nameless characters gather around the play's moral center, George, and harangue him with the futility of faith in the millennium of money:

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- What do you want, George? Faith? Principles? You want to live according to a code?

- That's fine. You go right ahead.

- You are free to do that.

- That is entirely up to you.

- You want to have some ethics? You want a code to live by?

- Fine. Pick one out.

- It doesn't matter which, George.

- They are a dime a dozen now.

It is not lost on this writer that the appearance of these themes in the Theatorium are apropos to the financial troubles that institution is experiencing, as John Clancy, the Artistic Director, begs and bows for dollars to meet an exorbitant rent. Hopkins' play is thus smack on for its production venue, making the title *A Place Like This* both an identifier and a question.

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While Hopkins is a writer who clearly thrills at words, his task is complexified by a strong belief that "there are some things we cannot and should not name." In this precept is a deep key to Hopkins' world. His lines move in the namable, the codifiable, the safe, yet they attempt to point the audience toward the ineffable, the daunting, the inconscionable. Listening to a Hopkins' play is to involve oneself in a group dynamic, a tether of meaning and nonsense, an extroverting involution that is as basic as sitting in a theater and as advanced as metempsychosis. To be blunt, it's a trip.

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Yet this trip would not be so engaging if, amidst the socialist undertones, the ambivalent identities, and the shamanesque strivings, there did not swirl a decent quantity of humor and humanity. In his last play to see Manhattan production, *Horse Country*, Bob and Sam, each alike described as "a man, who could be mistaken for an old vaudevillian, or a plainclothes detective," simply sit and banter of everything from big-engine cars and small sandwiches to the difficulties of taming children. The result is an ominous yet hilarious interchange between two of the most brilliant idiots one has ever been forced to enjoy.

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In our animated and interminable discussion about his work in a cafe down the street from the Theatorium, Hopkins told me "in most of my stuff, you're not really expressing anything. You're not playing a character. So what the hell are you doing? You're delivering symbols. When you get to a level where words don't work anymore, they turn into symbols to point at something you can't really talk about." A playwright with the cognizance of Wittgenstein, the ontology of Ouspensky, and the dialogic bravado of Artaud? See it if you dare.