

noorderzon

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INTERVIEW WITH ABIGAIL BROWDE & MICHAEL SILVERSTONE (600 HIGHWAYMEN)

Interview | Robbert van Heuven (www.robberivanheuve.nl) | August 21, 2014



According to American theatermakers Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone, theater has the possibility of offering a unique experience that goes far beyond presenting a fictional narrative. This is why they love working with ordinary people onstage (sometimes alongside actors.) For Browde and Silverstone, they

believe that theatre and its ability to bring people together occupies an especially important space in the Digital Age.

Abigail Browde and Michael Silverstone actually don't want to tell too much about their show *The Record*. To them, seeing a theater performance is an active activity. Rather than supply their theatergoers with too much advance information (which might result in a lazy viewing), they'd rather keep theatergoers curious and open about the performance that they are about to witness.

According to Browde and Silverstone (who are also a married couple, in addition to being an artistic duo), theater is everything *except* the passive consumption of an imaginary story. "The theater is one of the few places left where people can really meet each other," says Browde: "At risk of sounding like a hippy, theater is especially important in the Digital Age. We no longer need to leave the house to communicate with people or buy anything. We hardly ever really meet in person anymore. Seeing each other in person is at the core of what we need as human beings in order to thrive and to connect. And we must find new ways of connecting, really connecting. I think the theater is a good place to start. Why pretend to be somewhere imaginary? We're here and it's important to acknowledge our here-ness. Television pretends better than we ever could - so lets not try to keep up with it. Lets do what theater does best — explore what it means to be present."

BREAKING THE 'PRETENDING'

600 HIGHWAYMEN never denies that they are working with artificial constructs. Michael Silverstone: "Our shows are always about breaking open the notion of "pretending." This is why we never use a traditional unit set or costumes. It's not that we're averse to engaging with designers — it's because we're not after recreating a representational reality." Browde: "In a way, with "pretending" we tend to skip over the fact that it's really about the performers and audience coming together. It's a real meeting place. If we can all agree that we are meeting as "ourselves" - well, then we're able to create a very new kind of conversation in the theater."

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(cont)

Even when using an existing drama text, (like with their recent production *This Great Country*, which was an adaptation of *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller) they are looking for moments to break out of the theatrical construction. Silverstone: “Between the acted out scenes there were moments where the actors could be themselves for a while. They would find these incredible

moments of respite, where you would see the actor drop the mask of the character they were playing. In these quick instances, what we know of as “theater” and “fiction” would vanish and we’d be given this powerful reminder that we’re an audience in the room with actors and we’re all just here, now, together. I found that very refreshing. There’s a kind of freedom in that.”

After *Death of a Salesman* the two theatermakers wondered if these open moments of reality could expand to form a complete show. It was this inquiry, along with the portraits of Dutch photographer Rineke Dijkstra, that became the wellspring of inspiration for *The Record*. Silverstone and Browde found Dijkstra’s portraits to be unique in that they were not aspirational towards their subjects — making them prettier or more flattering — but instead painted them as they actually were, complete with imperfections.

LANDSCAPE OF PEOPLE

This is how *The Record* was created. A theatrical meeting between the audience and a large group of people assembled on stage. The show uses the element of time in order to get a better look at a landscape of people whom you might mindlessly pass by in the streets. Browde: “In *The Record* we give people the ability to simply look at another person. We grow up being taught that it’s rude to stare; so part of how *The Record* works is to redefine the social contract we have with strangers. We translate what it means to look at strangers and transform it into an acceptable experience. Part of how we do this is by slowing down the meeting. Daily life is so fast; we’re trying to reset this.” To make this experience as honest as possible, the two try to teach their performers to be as real as possible when they’re onstage. Browde: “We ask them to let go of the traditional inauthenticity of performing.” Silverstone: “We teach them to be normal and be seen.” Browde: “And to be vulnerable. It takes courage to stand in front of a group of people just being yourself.”

When *The Record* was performed by 45 people in New York City as part of the Under the Radar Festival, it was a major critical and artistic success for the young company. For Noorderzon, Browde and Silverstone are now tasked with creating the show all over again — this time with a brand new group of Groningers. Browde: “We have to rediscover the show as well. This puts us in the same place as our performers and our audience. To us it is new as well. We can’t just reproduce what we did in New York. Silverstone: “It’s like cooking. The recipe can be the same, but the kitchen and the ingredients are completely different. You can taste this in the final result.”

Robbert van Heuven (1978) is a freelance cultural and theater journalist and dramatist. He wrote and wrote, among other *Trouw*, *TM (Dramatist)*, *The Press*, *MoreTXT*, *Netherlands Theatre Institute*, *Theatre Topics*, and *New Reporter*. He was also editor of the Internet magazine *8WEEKLY* and is editor of the magazine *Arts '92*