



# The Ending of Humanity at the Bottom of the World? USHUAIA BLUE at Contemporary American Theater Festival

Contemporary American Theater Festival

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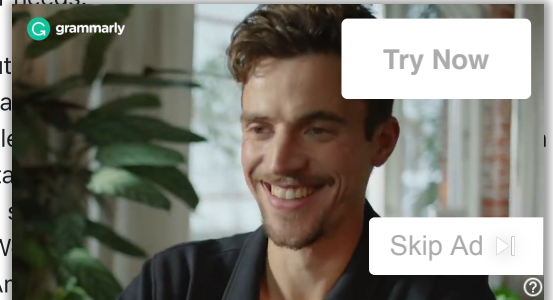
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by Jack L. B. Gohn Jul. 17, 2022



If you're looking for a well-made play, if you're hoping for a completely intelligible storyline, if you want to be able to tell all the characters apart or what their relationships are to each other or where their conflicts lie, if you want each line delivered to convey a meaning clear enough to paraphrase, Caridad Svich's *Ushuaia Blue*, premiering at the Contemporary American Theater Festival in Shepherdstown, is not for you. Playwright Svich is not out to satisfy your particular needs.

What she has produced is more like a choral poem in which each speaker contributes their own experiences and perceptions. The experiences shared have to do with people studying the ice at the vantage of the nearest continental point, the Argentinian town of Ushuaia. We learn about Pepa (Anna Keabler), a scientist, and Sara (Kelley Rae O'Donnell, pictured above), a documentary filmmaker. They meet together, and have shared the stresses and excitements of much isolation within a small community. The stimulus of the song of the ice, continually breaking up owing to climate change. We learn from a documentary of interviews with Pepa, an indigenous Ushuaia lighthouse keeper (Anna Keabler) who lives farther away from human habitations to commune with the ice and creatures occasionally visible where she goes. We learn that some mishap has befallen her out on the ice, leaving her comatose, and that back in the couple's Southern U.S. hometown, their extended family discusses them. That is about as definite as things get.





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The dialogue, mostly delivered in clipped phrases that force the audience to scurry to make sense of them, is highly evocative k sting with denotation. On the page, it is laid out as poetry, thus:

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I could have told you

I was happy

There

At the edge of the glacier.

The music was incredible.

I wish you could've heard it.

Deep under the water

Off against the ice sheets

It was as if the whole world were singing.

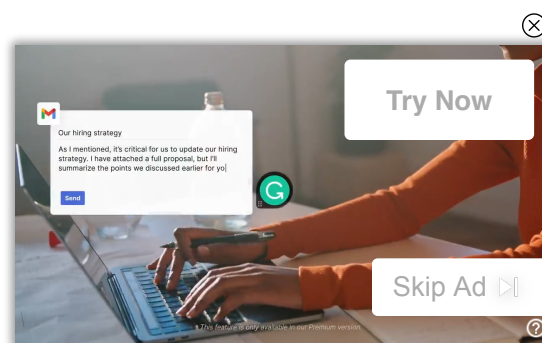
At first, it sounded like a song of deep sadness for a time

That would never be recover-ed [sic]

But then after a while,

As the ice kept breaking,

The song became one of joy



And I knew I had no choice

But to dance.

In other words, the better way to appreciate this play is as a lyric poem in which individual characters may figure somewhat, but not to the exclusion of all else. The lighthouse keeper's comments are important on this score, because it is she who articulates what I

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does finally satisfy audience members who might care whether Sara makes it or not.

Is that concession enough to satisfy most playgoers? I don't know. Imagine going to a poetry reading and discovering that the real business of the evening is a play; that would be the converse of the *Ushuaia Blue* experience. Some audience members may be fine with that kind of bait-and-switch, others might not. So with *Ushuaia Blue*. But either way, it should be acknowledged that while this is assuredly a theater piece, it is not quite what most of us mean when we refer to a play.

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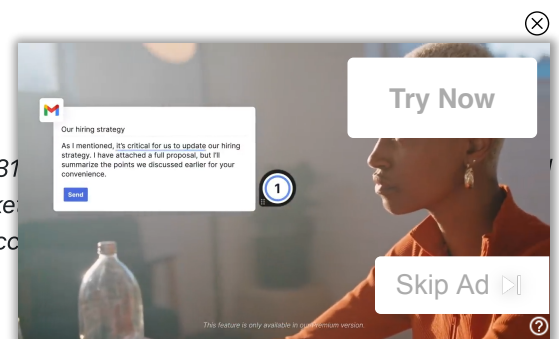


As a theater piece, it's enjoyable. The performances were all up to the high CATF standard, and I loved the set and projections, by Jesse Dreikosen and Tennessee Dixon respectively, which, together with Tony Galaska's lighting, established a world and mood of fracturing ice while also making room for a bed, a filmed interview complete with camera tripod, and space for the Greek chorus-like collective of hometown neighbors, spaces which all frequently had to be used at the same time. The brooding tone was also reinforced by another kind of collective, Broken Chord, which supplied the compositions.

I found it satisfying, but individual results may vary.

*Ushuaia Blue*, by Caridad Svich, directed by Jessi D. Hill, presented through July 31 at the Marinoff Theater, 62 West Campus Drive, Shepherdstown, WV 25443. Ticket price: \$15.00. ext. 1. Adult language. All audience members will be required to show proof of vaccination while in the theater.

Production photo credit: Seth Freeman.



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FROM THIS AUTHOR - JACK L. B. GOHN

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Review: Stunning, Well-Made HOUSE OF THE NEGRO INSANE at Contemporary American Theater Festival

July 20, 2022

A well-made, stunning play, about racist mental hospital practices in the not very long-distant past, with four strongly-imagined characters and an explosive ending.

Review: A Love Story, a Critique, a Cry of Despair: SHEEPDOG at Contemporary American Theater Festival

July 20, 2022

In the end, it is largely the combination of sensitively-selected detail and poetic diction on the one hand, and the big-picture view of various interlocked social problems that makes the show so extraordinary. In that big picture, the problems are too pervasive, too ingrained to surmount, and well-intentioned people trying to escape those problems will probably fail. In the end, the play suggests, we are much more the product of the forces that shaped us than of our own volition.

Review: BABEL At Contemporary American Theater Festival Probes the Dilemmas That Could Be Presented By Eugenics

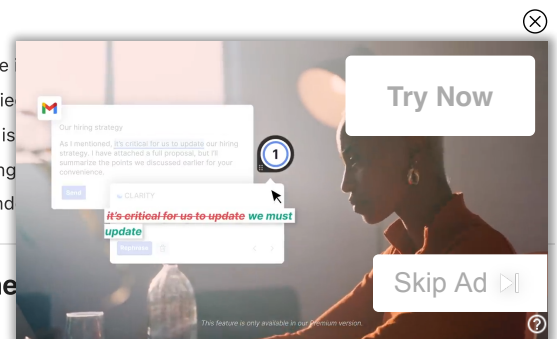
July 18, 2022

Babel, which invites us to contemplate a world, apparently in the near future, in which the human genome potential, including the potential for antisocial behavior – is determinable, and if a child cannot be "certified" the child will face lifelong legal discrimination thwarting most forms of career accomplishment. Abortion is pregnancies when a child is not certified are intense, as is the misery of potential parents whose gestating society. We witness how these dynamics play out with two couples who are friends. Definitely recommend

Review: A Chaotic THE FIFTH DOMAIN at Contemporary American Theater Festival

July 18, 2022

The play is an ungodly and irremediable mess, but it does demonstrate the importance of the proposition for which the central character was willing to put his career at risk, i.e., that more care needs to be taken, by industry and government alike, of secrets – their own and everyone else's.



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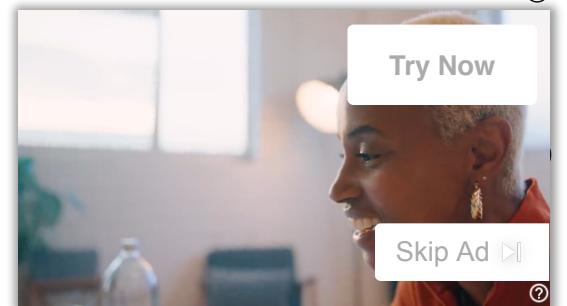
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