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Liz Magic Laser's Political Theater of the Absurd

By Karen Rosenberg

Critic's Notebook

The artist Liz Magic Laser's commissioned work for Performa11, "I Feel Your Pain," promised both a romance drawn from the playbook of political theater and a 21st-century version of the "living newspaper" (a bit of Russian Constructivist agitprop). It does not disappoint on either count.

The narrative, which unfolds over four acts and is being performed at the SVA Theater in Chelsea (there is one more performance, on Monday night), follows several couples as their relationships bloom and then deteriorate. But these private affairs are drawn from the public arena, and staged as a kind of circus. The characters woo each other with dialogue adapted from speeches, talk-show appearances and press conferences. And the actors move between various seats in the audience, trailed by live-feed video cameras whose images are projected on a movie screen, and assisted by voice-overs and a mute clown.

It opens with a confessional "first date," a canoodling couple sharing their hopes and fears in between smooches. Only when the talk turns from trust issues to George Washington and other founding fathers do you start to hear Sarah Palin and Glenn Beck. (The lines are drawn, entirely, from their January 14, 2010 interview). Later, you can discern a weepy John Boehner, a frustrated President Obama and a contrite Anthony Weiner. (Mr. Boehner's tearful "60 Minutes" interview of Dec. 12, 2010 serves as fodder for three different scenes). The actors are excellent, relishing the familiarity of certain phrases (like the one in the title) without betraying Ms. Laser's sources.

Ms. Laser could probably have gotten away with a performance that simply exploited the emotive manipulations of recent political rhetoric. But she wisely merges her script with the "living newspaper" concept, using the clown and the voice-over to tease the audience out of its passive state. On Sunday night, many spectators found themselves suddenly broadcast on the big screen, microphones thrust into their faces.