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Performa 11: Liz Magic Laser Feels Our Pain, Even if Politicians Don't



"I Feel Your Pain" performers Annie Fox and Rafael Jordan. (Courtesy the artist.)

Last night the 500-seat SVA Theater was almost completely full for the second and last performance of **Liz Magic Laser's** *I Feel Your Pain*. Though it was a live performance, we all sat looking at the theater's huge screen, while a camera crew roved the aisles, training their cameras on whichever of the six seated actors (and one clown) were involved in a given scene, which was projected live on the screen. The dialogue exchanged by the three couples in this romantic drama was adapted from political speeches, interviews, books and articles published as recently as this month and as old as WPA production from 1936, on subjects ranging from the Cold War to Katrina. The romances assembled from these disparate sources still retained a great deal of their original meaning (sources were cited in the program and on the screen before each act), making for a very funny and occasionally very impassioned subversion of America's political culture—all too appropriate for the night of Occupy Wall Street's **eviction**. *I Feel Your Pain's* plot, broadly, followed the courtships, fights, makeups and betrayals of three couples (in their twenties, thirties and fifties), who alternately recited text from a Glenn Beck-Sarah Palin interview, George Bush's speeches about the financial crisis, a John Boehner briefing, Ronald Reagan talking about Mikhail Gorbachev, Neil Strauss's bro bible *The Game*, and dozens more sources. Several scenes also featured a clown (Audrey Crabtree) who never spoke,

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but communicated with the audience in a mime-like manner and interacted with an omnipotent voice (Lynn Berg) coming over the theater's speakers. Especially spectacular were scenes like the very first, between the twentysomething couple (Annie Fox and Rafael Jordan), which turned a 2010 interview between Glenn Beck and Sarah Palin into an expression of righteous, youthful rebellion. "You want somebody who is doing it for the people," the Fox said, speaking Palin's words. "You want someone who is almost reluctant to serve."

Two scenes later, a 2008 interview between Hilary Clinton and Katie Couric about the former's campaign routine doubled as coded girl talk. The excellent Kathryn Grody, quoting Clinton, looked right at the closest camera: "Pure stamina? I've got a lot of that."

Interludes moderated by the clown and the omnipotent voice were less successful than the romantic ups and downs patched together from political speeches and interviews. During a passage borrowed from Colleen Reinhart's "How to Write a Political Speech with Emotions," the clown ran up and down the aisles handing audience members—including a few of the planted actors—while the voice on the PA asked what is the number one characteristic of the alpha male. Some said strength, one man said brains, two rows in front of me, **Emily Roysdon** hilariously offered, "Entitlement!" The answer was "a smile."

The narrative culminated in a pair of scenes that borrowed from speeches and interviews about the mishandling of Hurricane Katrina, the financial crisis, and the marital problems of Anthony Weiner and Arnold Schwarzenegger. Only during the final scene, with all six couples talking at once, often reciting identical lines from different speeches—like "I'm sorry," and "What were you thinking!?"—in unison, did the technically ambitious performance run into problems, with actors often appearing on screen while others were speaking, and repeatedly cutting to long shots of the audience while one of the camera crew moved into position for a closeup.

That said, the camera work throughout was very impressive, appropriately evoking live newscasts and TV interviews. The performance's two-pronged project, it seems, was not only to underline the way in which our political discourse is governed and manipulated by emotional games, but also to provide a kind of cathartic apology for this less-than-desirable state of affairs. Concluding her show with a chorus of injustices and apologies, Liz Magic Laser offered a momentary fleeting fantasy in which our politicians do actually feel our pain.