

May 8th, 2015

Dear Daniel Karasik and, really, dear community:

When I went to see your play in the last week of its run, I was expecting to have some issues. As you know, I heard an early workshop reading of *Little Death*; I was concerned about the ideas it espoused about how men and women see and are seen in relationship to one another. I regret that, at the time, I did not express this: so let's call that the first reason I am writing this letter. In spite of my reservations, I saw you drawing on your craft as a poet — you know how to write lean lines with open images — and so I suppose, despite the troubling points of departure, it felt like something of an open text, which may be what brought some very fine artists/people, and a list of institutions, to working on it over the course of the years you have been developing it. Throughout this production, I have had several conversations with people about how your play might have been 'saved' by a woman director, but I have the strong sense that how it played out, at least politically, is as you intended: The public conversation around your play (including your own posts) suggests that you were the producing engine for this production, and very much a lead artist in the rehearsal room.

I need to tell you that I was deeply offended and tired by *Little Death*. The woman seated next to me, whom I had only just met in the Theatre Centre lobby, hugged me at the conclusion of the play, in a gesture of solidarity, for having endured an intellectual assault against our gender together.

I was trying to explain the premise of your play to a friend: "So this man, upon learning of a 'cancer' that could *maybe, possibly, sometime* kill him, naturally reacts by telling his wife that he needs permission to have sex with as many other women as possible." "Oh, that old chestnut," she repli/sighed... I find the stereotype of the first thing that comes to a, potentially, dying man's mind being to enter as many vaginas as possible a little offensive to the hetero-male imagination— and it's a trope I don't need to see more of. Are there not other things a man might want to discuss with his life partner before (or at least after) hitting the hotel bar? Of course sexual desire and curiosity are real. As a woman who married the first person she had sex with: I get it. (One of the only seeming 'bright sides' of the very painful process of ending a 10 year marriage was the thought of sexual adventure with other people.) So, the first thing I am curious about, in a play that you and director Zachary Florence claim asks "fundamental questions about marriage," is why there is no indication whatsoever that the wife you have written, as a woman in her late 30s in her sexual prime, after being with the same man since she was 16, might have *also* considered or desired sex with someone else. Why are her curiosities or desires simply not on the table? Okay. So not everyone is curious about sex with other people (let's just pretend). The premise of the agreement between husband and wife here is that he alone is entitled to want to sleep with other people and that his possible impending death makes it a reasonable uni-directional request.

This brings me to a problem with translation. Translation of your personal life experience "around intimacy and the fear of death," as a playwright in your mid-twenties, imposed onto the bodies and voices of characters/actors approaching 40. Of course artists can write beyond their lived experience; I just don't think you have here in a way that I

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believe. Personally, as a, say, 24 year old woman, I might have been inexperienced enough to think that I needed to be supportive and understanding of my 20-something boyfriend's need to sow his oats. It might have taken me a while to say to myself: Hey?! What about my oats?! Or: Hey, actually this is a negotiation we need to have. Or: Hey how can we navigate this in a way that we are always checking in with one another and being mutually supportive (cause the fact that you *might* be dying— it's a thing for me too.) But the picture of a protagonist who, as his wife says, *without* sarcasm, "has the moral high ground," to do whatever he pleases as he watches (and we watch) the person he has spent at least 20 years with totally unravel, over a period of months, at his own hand (or penis), simply because she *said* it was okay... Well, I think a man in his late 30s knows better than that, and a woman in her 30s won't put up with that BS. Or, at least, I don't want to see the men and women who haven't aged in this strength and wisdom depicted on stage—Unless that narrative is troubled rather than reinforced. I am so tired of seeing versions of that story, and images like the, 'needy, nagging, desperate' woman normalized by a protagonist presented as well within his rights—and, after all, a good guy, because he works with disabled kids in a swimming pool and he did say no to having sex with that one 22 year old girl. All that was missing was a literal hero cookie baked for him by his wife after she choreographed a dance for his viewing pleasure.

I have corresponded this week with the woman who sat next to me during your show. "Did his exceptional cast have any say in how those woman, or the man for that matter, were portrayed?" she asked. "Why did he choose to show the older woman as the 'mommy'? As an almost 60 year old single and active woman, this character offended me to my bones. Myself, I go to a bar solo to read the paper and have a glass of wine: The simplistic resolve - that the man gave off some sort of aura that attracted these woman to him - was lazy at best." If we don't find the characters of a play plausible, then the voice we are hearing is that of the playwright. What are you trying to articulate with the stereotypes you penned?

The acid test for sexism is often: what if these roles were reversed. Try it with *Little Death*. I wonder what it would be like to watch a woman pick-up a string of men as her husband paces at home; to hear a man say 'you have the moral high ground because I said you could'; or some reversal (I can't even imagine what this would be) of a man seeing women as vaginal vessels to house him, on the way in or out of the world.

I didn't *want* to write this letter. I am not starting a theatre blog. I do not have a committed practice of cultural criticism and as an artist and audience member, I generally prefer to voice my concerns with an artist directly (a responsibility I take seriously in an ongoing project of learning how to really talk about work with colleagues and collaborators). But, on Saturday night, after another show, I asked some people: "Hey, do you guys think that the majority of critical /essayistic discourse on social media about art, is mostly written by men?" I watched the considering faces of my peers and waited through the pauses. A few others joined our milling circle so I repeated the question, this time replacing the word 'art' with 'theatre'; in about a millisecond three voices said "yes." "Not to mention that almost all the critics are men," one added. What I

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had been wondering when I asked the question was: does writing this sort of open letter require a sort of hubris that, in general, the people who shared my visceral reaction to *Little Death* don't have. "You have to write the letter," said the friend who knew the motivation for my fishing, "No one who wants this called out *wants* to be a self-anointed cultural commentator, so no one ever calls it out." Which is not to say that people aren't talking about these issues—they are, but the conversations aren't taking up space in the quotidian public arenas in which your open letters and the images of your show appear. I have received multiple email notices; your play is all over my FB algorithm; and there has been much more press coverage of your play than say, *Mouth Piece*, the other piece in the Riser Project at The Theatre Centre with yours concurrently—and, according to Ravi Jain, a serendipitous juxtaposition with your play (as a work in the arena of feminist inquiry). An aside here: I suspect that *Little Death* having more coverage than *Mouth Piece*, despite the latter generating more audience/industry interest, has, in some part, to do with one piece having two female collaborators to credit and the other a solitary male artist figure to promote... Anyway, since the narrative of *Little Death* and you, its author, as a cultural commentator do take up a considerable space in our theatre media landscape, from reviews to facebook posts, I feel I need to lob a ball into the field to paint a patch of the grass in another colour.

On your theatre blog, you recently wrote of "the scarcity of Canadian artists" who fit a definition of "gifted playwright." I wonder if your argument suggests that people just need new things to work on and so it is difficult to be discerning. Leora Morris, who directed a few early workshops of this play, told me that it was great work for an emerging director/dramaturg. She likes this investigation part, which she described to me as "the rich and tricky time when, by asking 'how do we do this play', we get to the real (and sometimes difficult) question: 'do we do this play?'"

How can we really talk about the work we are making and what it says about theatre, our community, and our world at large? When the institutions with which you developed the play chose not to pursue it, did any ask: Daniel, have you thought about what you are putting into the air we share with this story? Do you know how it contributes to a system that is sucking our vitality and capacity as women and men?

You recently posted on Facebook that, for you, "self-knowledge is the sexiest thing. And emotional generosity. And a willingness to be fully present." In this supposedly sexy play, or at least a play that you say "is pretty focused on the erotic" — this character of your voice, the 'very attractive' man who manages to seduce a steady string of women with calculated conversation, where is his self knowledge or generosity?

Regarding presence, this week, a colleague told me he thinks you have real talent and desire. He also said that 'anyone who is awake and *present* would be troubled by this play'—so he reached out to you about *Little Death* and his concerns about the sexual stereotypes it reinforced. Apparently you asked him why people weren't telling you this. You offered something to the effect of: 'Nobody in the press has said anything'. So let's call this the last reason I am writing this. It seems that a public arena might be the only

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place we can have the conversation count. This colleague also told me that he has total faith in the goodwill of discourse: I hope we can work towards this generous view.

With consideration,

Erin Brubacher