

July 25, 2009

If we slip back in time, can we change?

By Jay Harvey
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As children, most of us probably toyed with idea of placing ourselves in an earlier time. The game quickly brings up problems that can give even mature imaginations a headache:

How much of our present selves do we transport back there? Do we have the same parents? If we were to fit in entirely so as not to arouse suspicion "back there," how much of what we really are would remain? Would we be like the Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, or would we know as little of the future as we all do now -- in other words, next to nothing?

When time travel involves a version of the personally recoverable past, the game turns serious. That's the burden of "The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel." The Phoenix Theatre's last production of the season, beautifully designed by director Bryan Fonseca, is necessarily knotty and resistant to linear thinking.

Nonetheless, Nicholas Wardigo's lengthy one-act drama successfully puts a familiar situation before the audience: the challenge to love posed by one partner's mortal illness. This gives the mental conundrums of time travel a provisional clarity and searing emotional impact.

Claire and Zoey have a challenging relationship even before Claire, a high-strung, buttoned-down type negotiating the corporate world, falls ill. Zoey, a punkish bundle of strong opinions and freakish ways of presenting herself, is smart but malleable.

Under the influence of the intellectual Rachel's withering scrutiny of time-travel themes in popular entertainment, Zoey appears to clone herself to attempt an alternative course for her life with Claire. In Friday's performance, Kelli Johnson and Sarah M. Grant were hauntingly vulnerable as Zoey 1 and Zoey 2.

In Sara Riemen's clever portrayal of Rachel, who will settle for power over Zoey if she can't have intimacy, the audience is inundated with critiques of Hollywood's implausible time-travel scenarios. It's clear Zoey must absorb her friend's lectures and bend them to her own use, messing with the inevitable.

The time-traveling Zoey turns out to be stuck in a spin cycle (washing-machine imagery is rich in this production) that rests on her need to dominate Claire, a commanding figure in Elena Maria Flores' performance.

The play has a subdued happy ending, but it's set against a grim philosophical backdrop involving free will and the choices we've made -- and would make if given do-overs.

Additional Facts

'The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel'

- **What:** Play by Nicholas Wardigo.
 - **Where:** Basile Theatre at the Phoenix Theatre, 749 N. Park Ave.
 - **When:** 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays, 7 p.m. Thursdays through Aug. 15.
 - **Tickets:** \$15 (Duke Energy Cheap Seats for all performances); call (317) 635-7529.
 - **Bottom line:** Intellectual riddles give a story of love, selfishness and sacrifice a run for its money.
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"The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel" theater review

Posted on July 22, 2009 by Josefa Beyer



Sarah M. Grant and Elena Flores in 'The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel' - Photo by Julie Curry

Phoenix Theatre; directed by Bryan Fonseca

Event:
"The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel"

Venue:
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In *The Dos and Don'ts of Time Travel*, free spirited Zoey travels in time to salvage her relationship with the more conservative Claire. As Philadelphia playwright Nicholas Wardigo conceives it, time travel is facilitated not by DeLoreans or wormholes, but by sheer human will. After Claire discovers the secret, she continually repeats the two years of her life that she can't get right. On the sideline, Zoey's friend Rachel offers us time travel wisdom from her college thesis on movies like *Back to the Future*, *Somewhere in Time* and *The Matrix*. Judging from audience laughter, we [share](#) Rachel's fascination with the genre's mind-bending plots and strained logic. While Wardigo's story has its share of time travel impossibilities, he presents an interesting human foible, the desire to reconstruct personal history to make things "right." Wardigo gets it right with witty yet realistic dialogue and a strong sense of heart. Zoey, played sweetly and sassily in different time zones by Kelli Johnson and Sarah M. Grant, may be misguided in her efforts, but is always earnest in her desire. I applaud Wardigo for keeping his somehow fluffy and thoughtful play to a just-right 70 minutes -- and director/set designer Bryan Fonseca for using the space, players and time so well. In its Midwest premiere, *Time Travel* is an enjoyable ride that allows us to ponder our pop culture past and pop through time with an undefeatable spirit. Through Aug. 15; 317-635-PLAY, www.phoenixtheatre.org.

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Theatre Review: “The Do’s and Don’ts of Time Travel” at the Phoenix



Last Thursday, still semi-exhausted from a long business trip for my day job, I looked at my calendar and thought, “Yikes! A Midwest premiere is opening at the [Phoenix](#) tonight!” I fired off a frantic e-request for a media pass and drove downtown. I regret not asking one of my usual theatre buddies to go with me on my media pass. They all would have enjoyed this piece, I think. It is odd but likable.

It is also beautiful and sexy and thought-provoking, and I would like to see it again. Maybe I can get one of my buddies to buy tickets with me. Every performance of this show is a Duke Energy Cheap Seats Night. (I.e. - \$15 per regular adult ticket instead of the usual \$25.) Hmm.

Anyway, “The Do’s and Don’ts of Time Travel,” by Nicholas Wardigo, is about two women - an endearingly earnest scholar and a sex toy-selling cutie-pie - who talk over the title topic between wash loads at the local Laundromat.

The scholar, Rachel (played by Sara Riemen), is fed up with the schmaltziness and bad logic of most science fiction movies. She wants to write her dissertation on how much they suck. “If a movie plays and there’s no one to see it, does it still suck?” Yes, according to Rachel. She says that most time travel stories depend on time travel being possible due to the force of a machine or the force of Nature. But really, she says, the only way it could ever truly be possible is by the force of one’s will.

Zoey (played by Kelli Johnson), seems to be only half-listening. Her thoughts are on her gorgeous lover, Claire (Elena Marisa Flores), who is almost completely uncommunicative now from her wheelchair back at the hospital.

As Zoey and Rachel do their laundry and explore the idea of time travel together and separately, we gradually realize that they each have made discoveries independently about how to go about it. And, therefore, they have raised more questions.

For example, if you know you can go back and relive any chunk of your life, which chunk would it be? Do you choose the part that you enjoyed the most, and hope that it will include more and more of the very best experiences? Or do you choose the part in which you yearned most strongly for a different ending and try to control the events so that it goes in a different direction this time?

And speaking of control, is true love about control...or is it about being present? Or maybe surrendering? Is it about lifetimes...or moments?

“Everything is set in stone,” Rachel says, “but there are an infinite number of stones.”

Zoey sometimes passes herself as she hurtles gracefully through time. Sometimes she even meets herself in her travels, which is as deliciously unsettling to the audience as it is to her. Er, them. Zoey 1 and Zoey 2 (Sarah M. Grant) are fascinating to watch as they mirror one another and break apart, come back and separate again, each manifesting various aspects of the original(?) Zoey as they travel.

Claire appears in multiple variations of herself, too, and we see why Zoey fell in love with her in the first place, or rather, in the first time, and why Zoey continues to want to be close to Claire, to feel loved and needed by her in return.

Each of the design elements works with the rest to deepen the feeling of being in a fantastic, yet believable, situation. Nearly identical run crew members (Jeremy Perkins and Daniel Perkins) turn and wind the pieces of the set, designed by director Bryan Fonseca, like rumbling cogs in a giant clock tower, while clever videography by [Zach Rosing](#) in a circle at the back of the stage makes the audience think of the vastness of electrons and protons, and of time measured in glops and shards or precisely marked with the drop of coin. Karen Witting designed the witty costumes, which include two identical, electric blue wigs for the Zoeyes, and one particular outfit that left me breathless and wondering if maybe I am bisexual after all.

Dani Norberg designed the lights, a first for her although she has *run* lights and sound for several Phoenix shows in the past. She came over to me before the show to say hi and to confess her nervousness.

“I want the show to look pretty and fun,” she told me. “Sci-Fi but not Sci-Fi Channel, you know? A science fiction-y show but at the same time not a crazy aliens thing.”

I congratulated her on getting the chance to design and asked her what the experience had been like.

She said she had learned a lot, both in terms of vocabulary - “It’s not a light bulb, it’s a lamp!” - and in terms of working with a director to support his vision of the whole piece. “Bryan and I had many, many conversations about the lights.” She and Bryan both changed their minds many times before the design was set.

“What was the most challenging part about designing the lights for this show?” I asked.

“Oh, the space! The pole (that helps hold the ceiling up over the small stage), the low ceiling, the rafters that hang down. You want to hang a light so that it shines a certain way, but then because of the small space it’s too bright.” I imagine a light that is too close would be too hot on the actors, too.

But Dani hastened to add, and I agree, that although the intimacy of the Frank and Katrina Basile Theatre space there in the basement of the Phoenix can be a challenge, it is also a pleasure. I love going to shows down there.

“What are your favorite parts of your lighting design?” I asked. “What do you hope people will enjoy most?”

“The time travel parts. Ricardo came in and helped with the choreography in those scenes, too.”

(I meant to double-check, but I assume Dani meant Ricardo Melendez, an actor-director from Virginia who appeared in last month’s [“Octopus”](#) at the Phoenix.)

I hadn't yet seen the show when I talked to Dani, but I told her afterwards that the time travel parts are magical and lovely. And they are.

By the way, the ushers had run out of programs by the time I arrived. ("The extras are in a box somewhere, but we can't find them right now" they told me.) I panicked - I rely on the program to tell me how to spell everyone's names! - but the ushers told me "Time Travel"'s program was the same double-program that had been used for "Octopus." Fortunately, I knew I still had that program at home, so I relaxed.

I mention this to you because by the time you go, the program may be different, but in my program, the lighting design is credited to Laura Glover, with assistance by Kristin Johnson. However, I received confirmation from Phoenix Managing Director Sharon Gamble that Dani Norberg did, indeed, design lights for the whole show herself, working closely with the Bryan Fonseca.

Go, Dani!

I also loved, loved, loved the sound design, also by Bryan Fonseca. The playwright, Nicholas Wardigo, was in the audience Thursday night and I got to chat with him for a few minutes after the performance. He mentioned that the songs in the sound design are supposed to have come from Zoey's iPod. If I ever own an iPod, I am going to ask Bryan if I can hire him to load it up for me.

I was dead tired Thursday night and I hadn't had time to prepare any special questions for Nicholas, so although I enjoyed chatting with him, I still don't know much about him. I don't, for example, even know if he prefers to be called "Nick." I did have two questions, however, right after seeing "The Do's and Don'ts of Time Travel."

"How did you come to write this piece?" I wanted to know. "I mean, why time travel?"

"I really do think science fiction movies suck," he told me. "But I am still drawn to them. I OD'd on science fiction in my teens and twenties. I had read *Dune* when I was fifteen and loved it. I went back to it when I was 25 and couldn't stand it."

"This play is really about relationships, isn't it?" I asked. "Not just time travel?"

"Oh, yeah! Of course..."

"It's about staying together in sickness and in health, all that good stuff. I really liked it."

"Thank you!"

"So...I have another question: why lesbians? This play is really about all kinds of love relationships, right?"

I couldn't figure out why I was sort of bristling as I asked this, but when I got home I realized that what I really wanted to know from the happily married straight male playwright was whether he had purposely made this piece both a play about fully-realized characters who happen to be lesbians AND a play that riffs on straight male fantasies about lesbians...or whether his subconscious had done it for him.

As it turned out, his answer didn't really tell me what I wanted to know, but it didn't matter.

"I always knew Zoey would see herself," he said. "I could have made the characters straight, but I thought a lesbian seeing another woman, even though it is herself, would relate to that woman differently than a straight woman seeing herself."

I had to admit, that sounded intriguing to me, too. And it does add another layer of texture to the piece.

"It's interesting to see different productions of this play," Nicholas went on. "In Philadelphia (where "Time Travel" had its world premiere last October) the director emphasized the Goth/punk aspects. Here the director emphasized the James Bond aspects."

It was a pleasure talking to both the playwright and the lighting designer about their work.

I also enjoyed chatting with Phoenix Marketing Director Lori Raffel while we munched on yummy finger foods at the opening night party. She told me that the Phoenix's next season has been set and will be announced on August 3. She also gave me some exciting hints, but I promised not to share them yet.

Other info: "The Do's and Don'ts of Time Travel" lasts approximately one hour and fifteen minutes with no intermission but (pardon the expression) the time flies by. If you get there early you can buy a decadent brownie or a micro-brewed beer from Jessica behind the bar downstairs AND enjoy an exhibit of ethereal paintings by Kyle Ragsdale. Actually, I was too far away to read the artist's identification card, but I am sure I would recognize Kyle Ragsdale's unique style anywhere. Some day, some day, I would like to own one of his paintings myself.

"The Do's and Don'ts of Time Travel" continues Thursdays-Saturdays at the [Phoenix Theatre](#) in Indianapolis through Saturday, August 15, 2009. Please call 317-635-PLAY (7529) to make a reservation.

Hope Baugh - www.IndyTheatreHabit.com

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PS - I can't believe I forgot to at least mention the assistant director. I have been an assistant director, so I know it can be a lot of work! Pleasurable work, but still. For "Time Travel," director Bryan Fonseca was assisted by Brandon Gelvin, at least according to my program. Christopher Hansen was the technical director and managed the props. Amanda Lynn Meyer was the assistant stage manager (and maybe the light and sound operator?) Shane Chuvalas served as a consultant. And if you run your mouse over the photo above, you will see that [Julie Curry](#) took the publicity photos for the show.

This entry was posted on Thursday, July 23rd, 2009 at 11:12 pm and is filed under [Conversations](#), [Reviews - "Regular" Theatre](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can skip to the end and [leave a response](#). Pinging is currently not allowed.

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4 Responses to "Theatre Review: "The Do's and Don'ts of Time Travel" at the Phoenix"

1. 1
[Austin Lugar](#) Says:

This show looks like a lot of fun. I'll try to catch it before I head back to college. Though I'll probably pass on the micro-brewed beer because of "the law" and other silly things like that.

[July 23rd, 2009 at 11:51 pm](#)

1. 2
[Hope](#) Says:

Hah! Yes, please do not anything that might get you arrested, Austin. I would miss you if were in jail.

I'll be interested to hear what a film buff such as yourself thinks of this show.

Thanks for reading!

[July 24th, 2009 at 6:28 am](#)

1. 3
[gail bray](#) Says:

enjoyed your review as always Hope and am seeing the show tonite!

[July 24th, 2009 at 3:19 pm](#)

1. 4
[Hope](#) Says: