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This year it feels like popular culture has been strangely inundated with Nietzschean concepts.

The phrase "Time is a flat circle" has made its way into Happy Hour banter, uttered between Wild Turkey shots and PBR chasers by hipsters everywhere. It would be easy to think The Essential Straight and Narrow also buys into the eternal time dilemma, with its minor character who offers a sort of thesis to the play: "Everything in the universe just repeats itself, it just keeps repeating."

But the tension between Graham and Jo reminds us that life is not Philosophy 101. Life is a visceral experience where one look or an accidental touch can knock us off our given course. This play tricks us with its postmodern gimmicks into thinking we are about to witness an avant-garde intellectual showdown. By the end, however, I felt a punch to my gut so extreme, I almost called the man who broke my heart out of a desperate nostalgia that only great art can invoke.

This heart-in-mouth experience reaches its zenith in the climatic Halloween party scene. The party is wild, terrifying and full of dark corners in which romantic relationships play out years of drama. Everyone's motives are masked, both literally (it is Halloween, after all) and figuratively. This is a party where vulnerability is a fatal weakness and no one wants to be exposed. Jo and Graham come together and break apart and much of the party features Jo sitting alone staring off into space. Is she praying that Graham will come back? Is she plotting an escape? Can she leave the sordid and cramped quarters of the hotel room? Can she outrun her doubts and fears?

Haven't we all been at this party? I have. I've dolled myself up in the hopes that he will be there, standing by the jello shots, and that I will find either the strength to forgive him or, better, the agency to move on without him. This party is the ultimate liminal zone where the characters and the audience are stuck between going forward and giving in. The characters drink away their pain, as we hold our breath in the stands, and the music drones on.

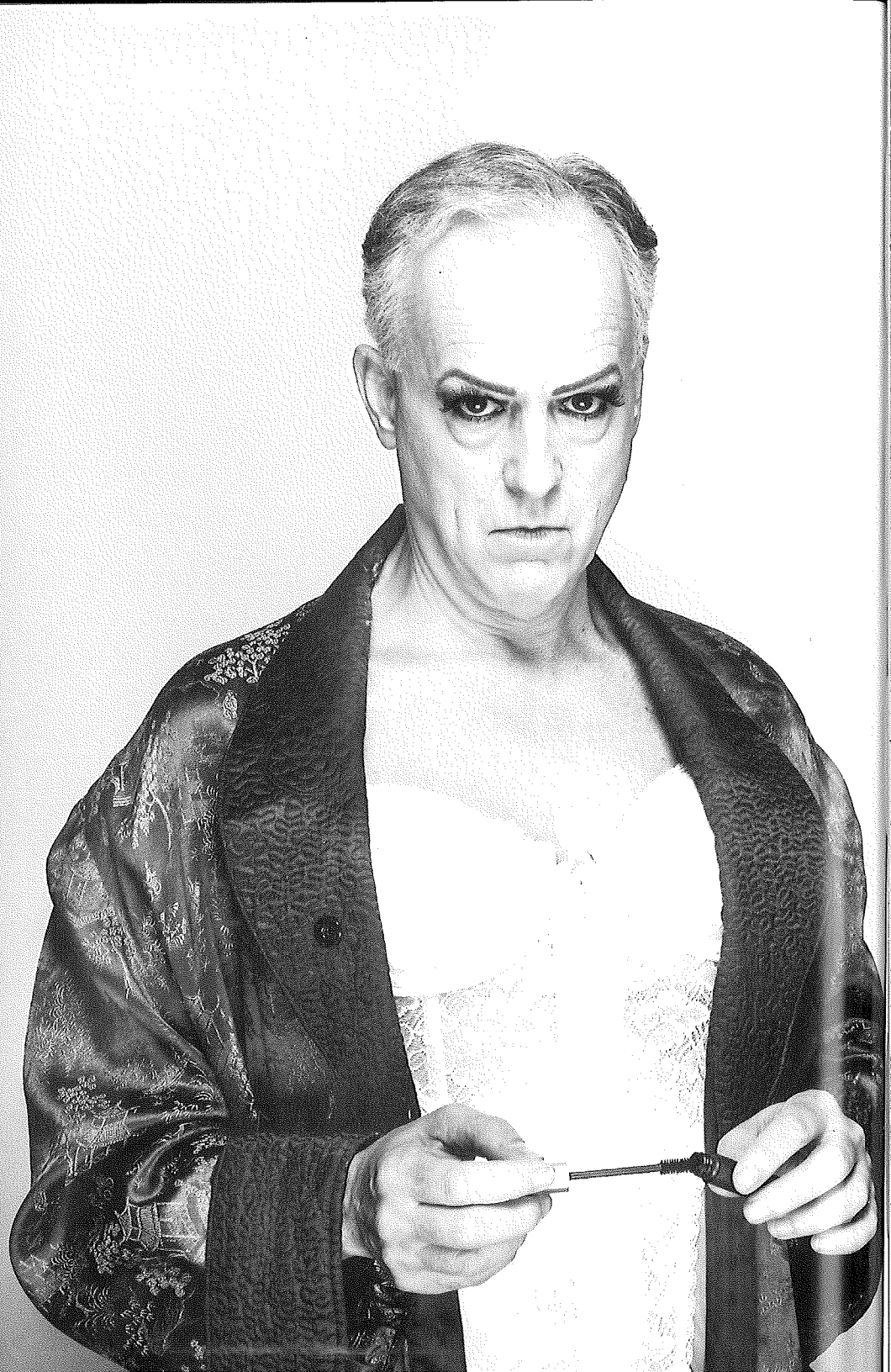
Graham and Jo have a mind-meld connection that leaves us cheering on their relationship, but we know better –at least I do. It is no coincidence that I longed to hear my ex-lover's voice after the performance, a voice so familiar and so painful I worry no one else will or should ever know me that well. This is a play about the first person who really looks at you, and the moment you turn away from their stare. This is a play about the way we find ourselves repeating the most masochistic of patterns. Do we think we can correct the wrongs done to us or because we think we deserve the pain?

At its core, The Essential Straight and Narrow explores the tragedy in choosing to perform our pasts. Though we might strive to create new narratives, maybe we can do no better than Jo, who ends with a small nod to herself – "That's it, that's all I've got."

(For the record, I didn't call him.)

| Lacy Warner

JONATHAN BOCK, MAYA LAWSON, JOE CURNUTTE, MERLIN WHITEHAWK



"The deep waters of sexual desire and sexual identity will always be murky, but there is no better place than the theater, with its many levels of transformation, to explore, without defining, the painful process of discovering who you are."

I once worked for a man whose father had been a door-to-door salesman in the 1950s peddling women's hosiery. During my boss's summer vacations he was forced to go shadow his father in order to learn the family business. He told me that being brought into the intimacies of a wide variety of women's kitchens and living rooms and watching in silence as they tried on pairs of hosiery (all while their husbands were off at the office) were his first and even some of his most profound erotic experiences. But he said it wasn't the act of undressing that he found arousing; instead, it was when the women would put the stockings on. For him, it was through the act of tugging the silk fabric gently around an ankle and then pulling firmly up over the knee, finally fastening to a garter belt, that these ladies emerged from housewives to full-blown women in his pubescent imagination.

When I was originally told this story, I chafed at my boss's understanding of femininity – that these ladies somehow couldn't be seen as sexual unless they were wearing a prescribed uniform of womanhood. But after watching the powerful performances in *Casa Valentina*, I understand now that his attraction had little to do with what the women were wearing. His seduction came from witnessing the art of getting dressed. It was when these women stood up on their high heels and smoothed down their skirts over a new pair of stockings that they went from objects of desire to desiring subjects. My boss's hosiery predilection and *Casa Valentina* share a very powerful point: we all perform – physically or otherwise – a transformation in order to harness the power of our sexual identities.

The strength of *Casa Valentina* centers on such transformations, only this time housewives are not getting dressed, but instead big strong city men adjusting their petticoats and corsets. The premise for *Casa Valentina* is the real life Casa Susana, a getaway for transvestites in the Catskills that flourished during the early '60s. Rita Ryack, the award-winning costume designer, said that when researching the play she found many photographs of the original Casa. "It's just girls posing in their clothes," she said. "They're quite casual and for the most part they wanted to look like ordinary women."

Yet the beauty of the play is that the longing to pass as a "genuine girl" is far more complex than what most of its players want it to be. Some characters would have, in a different era, crossed over from transvestite to transsexual. Others suggest that their cross dressing is more of a sexual fetish. The naïve Miranda speaks with quiet vulnerability about the way chiffon feels against her skin: "When I dress I'm excited. The clothes are soothing, almost cool, but then I begin to feel feverish." And yet still others hide their homosexuality in order not to rock the boat of the belief that these are straight men who simply love to dress in their wives' clothing.

The deep waters of sexual desire and sexual identity will always be murky, but there is no better place than the theater, with its many levels of transformation, to explore, without defining, the painful process of discovering who you are. Activism fails to fully elucidate this journey with its tragic need for agenda, as critical theory similarly fails with its constant requisite for terminology – gender, binary, and construct to name a few. But performance, specifically *Casa Valentina*, succeeds because it relies completely on examining the struggle. Rita explained, "We never wanted the audience to forget that these were men dressed as women." And we don't. It is through the play's relentless reminder that the characters are never fully able to achieve their desires, and that on some level they will always be recognized as outsiders, that the audience experiences true compassion for their plight. *Casa Valentina* is far more interested in the battle than the resolution and it has no proscribed mode of living. Instead, its central conflict forces the characters to acknowledge the difference of their longings, and in doing so it warns against any kind of dogmatic lifestyle. In short, people are messy. Just ask the newbie at the bungalow who has never put on eyeliner in her life.

But what of this elusive concept, "womanhood?" The opening scene of the play is a tableau with each of the characters getting dressed in front of individual vanities. Watching this I couldn't forget the image of the housewives from my boss's youth, with their manicured hands fastening and unfastening their undergarments, or even of myself as I pick at my "genuine girl" flesh in front of my own full-length mirror. Though this is ultimately a play about freedom – the freedom to be you and me – it speaks more truly about the cages that keep us locked inside ourselves. As Simone de Beauvoir said, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes a woman." It is the emotional candor of *Casa Valentina* that allows us to recognize that for all of us who wish to pursue it, the notion of "womanhood" might feel forever out of reach.

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