

## OBJECTS SUBVERTS EXPECTATIONS

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By Colin Thomas

Objects for the Emancipated Consumer.

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I can't remember the last time I was so engaged by the dilemma of the postmodern subject. DON'T STOP READING. I'm kidding with the bafflegab—kind of. For good reason, many people associate postmodernism and its vocabulary with pretentiousness. But, in our culture, we eat, breathe and sleep the postmodern sensibility every day. That's why it's so cool that *Objects for the Emancipated Consumer* explores this ubiquitous world-view, this misunderstood philosophy, in a presentation that's seriously smart but also accessible, funny, and thoroughly theatrical.

Postmodernists will debate the definition of the term postmodern until they die; some theorists even deny the sensibility's existence. But I'm going to fly in the face of academic nitpicking—and infighting—to give you my reductive notion about how some of the ideas associated with postmodernism apply here.

Postmodernism involves the dissolution of truth. Let's use history as an example. Time was when the conquerors wrote history and their version of events was generally accepted, thereby creating a more or less unified reality. So we spoke of the "triumph" of Christopher Columbus's "discovery" of America, for instance. Postmodern theorists, on the other hand, apply a critique of colonialism; Columbus's arrival wasn't such a world-improving watershed if you were one of the Native women he raped or a member of one of the cultures that were pillaged and decimated post-contact. Feminism, queer theory, class and racial politics all

inform postmodernism; in the end, you get multiple, conflicting views of history and the notion of a single, fixed truth becomes irretrievable. And a sidebar: advances in technology—especially telecommunications—escalate the experiences of multiplicity, overload, and rootlessness. As relationships and communities become virtual, our identities become more fluid. This can be liberating; think about the increasing choice we experience in terms of gender self-definition, for instance. But the dilemma of the postmodern subject—that is, anybody who lives within this kind of experience—arises from the difficulty of creating meaning without fixed reference points.

In *Objects*, the folks from Liminal, a performance-art company from Portland, Oregon, illuminate all of this without stopping to publicly theorize—and without pausing for breath. In a clever device, they frame their performance as a murder mystery. A hard-boiled detective tries to figure out who killed whom and why. As detectives do, he looks for “truth”, but his quest is hilariously anachronistic. The poor guy is searching for clues in an airport, an alienating, culturally arbitrary space; everybody around him lies and assumes different identities; and he has no memory—in a metaphor for the fragmentation of our collective history, his personal history has dissolved.

Every audience member becomes a detective, too. Theatrically speaking, the company throws us all in at the deep end and leaves us to fend—individually—for ourselves. Liminal performs *Objects* in open settings and the audience is free to roam, but the flood of information is staggering, especially at first. Two or three scenes take place at once—often out of sequence—and all of them demand our attention. Do I want to watch the detective interrogate a witness in a confrontation that’s sometimes violent, sometimes sexual or desperately vulnerable? Or do I follow the slim woman who passes me a note asking me if I’m her contact? She seems to have some relationship to espionage that involves the potential destruction of all of the airplanes in the world. I experience a recognizable frustration: I get this feeling when I try to make sense of the news—currently, the news about Afghanistan. What sources are reliable? What agendas are at work? Will I ever resolve the inconsistencies, or is the situation too complex, too disparate? In *Objects for the Emancipated Consumer*, the invitation to find a solution is traditionally theatrical; the frustration of the solution bracingly subverts our narrative expectations.

In a sense, all of the characters are detectives, too. In a complex series of couplings, they try to find other versions of truth: stable reference points in

personal relationships. That, too, proves tricky in a world booby-trapped with hidden corporate and personally selfish motivations. Asked by an agonized airline passenger what will happen to the facts he has provided in a complaint, a woman replies: “I give them to men who decide if you’re cost-efficient enough to help.” “This is the last time I’ll lie. I promise,” a man tells his lover as he holds a gun to her head.

Although Liminal conceived and originally performed *Objects* before the recent terrorist attacks, September 11 is all over this piece in an eerily prescient way. According to the text, the events we witness are taking place in an airport located on the top of a business tower: Cascade International Airlines, or CIA, runs the place. As we wait because our flights are delayed, we pick up whisperings of plots and hear phrases such as, “It’s biological then,” and statements including, “She was a good witness because she didn’t care about the privacy of others.” Even before the attacks, isolation and the apparent arbitrariness of meaning were busily breeding both paranoia and deference to authority, of course, but that has all increased. One of the characters insisted on searching my bag “for security reasons”. I refused to let him do so but another audience member acquiesced. In one of my favourite exchanges, the detective demands, “You confess to murder?” and receives the reply: “I confess to my leadership skills.”

Besides the complexity of its ideas, several factors keep this event compelling. The actors all deliver understated, emotionally hungry performances. And the sometimes expressionistic movement is surprising; you never know when one character is going to leap on another’s back or bully their scene partner’s body into a pose of tenderness. I have only three complaints: the title reeks of egghead exclusiveness; the video elements, which are interesting but tangential riffs at the moment, could be more integrated; and this show’s run in Vancouver is too damn short. Liminal is one of the most engaging companies I’ve encountered. Let’s hope they bring *Objects* back for a longer run so that more Vancouverites get a chance to hurl themselves into the white noise—to make up their own, inevitably incomplete stories by clicking their way through the hypertext.

## **CONTACT    SCHEDULE**

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