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Review: ‘Empathy School & Love Story’ Plumbs the Varieties of Loneliness

By **BEN BRANTLEY** APRIL 22, 2016

Jim Findlay in “Empathy School” at the Abrons Arts Center. CreditSara Krulwich/The New York Times

Because theater is an inherently social form, most plays are date shows — capital-E events that you want to attend with someone else, so you can rehash the pleasures and problems of them afterward. But there are also those rarer plays to which you to want to go solo, works that make you savor the pleasures of being solitary.

Take “Empathy School & Love Story,” the writer and director Aaron Landsman’s engaging diptych on varieties of loneliness, which runs through April 30 at the Abrons Arts Center. Made up of two monologues (but of course), it’s an ideal single-ticket show, perfect for pondering on a quiet walk home by yourself, especially on a spring night in Manhattan that draws out those ephemeral human butterflies called New Yorkers.

Yes, you’ve been part of an audience for a while, all of you looking at the same people in the same place. But even though the evening’s first offering has us briefly joining hands with the nearest strangers (it only hurts a minute), the production is dedicated to the perspectives of outsiders who never completely connect with anyone else.

Mr. Landsman is a busy downtown theater artist whose earlier works include the immersive "Open House" and (with Jim Findlay and Mallory Catlett) "City Council Meeting." He has set these latest pieces in places that naturally summon feelings of isolation within a crowd: a bus traveling by night through the American heartland (for "Empathy School," performed by Mr. Findlay) and the streets — pretty much all of them — of New York City (in "Love Story," with Frank Harts).

"Empathy School" appropriately finds Mr. Findlay, a large and crusty man who brings to mind the sort of irresponsible uncle that kids find irresistible, taking on a tutelary role. He invites us to join him on a cross-country trip to a funeral in Illinois for a man — a mechanic named Wayne — whom he didn't know all that well. Except it turns out he did, which means that he really didn't.

First presented on a moving bus (in 2014), "Empathy School" — set in a room behind the proscenium stage — here evokes the aura of anonymous travel with a through-the-window video of shifting yet unchanging nightscapes, in which the whole world appears in tones of gray and off-white. (You've been on that trip, right?) The view from the Interstate is occasionally interrupted by animations by Brent Green evoking mechanical cogs and wheels and a scrawny, solitary head.

Mr. Green also composed the melancholy bluegrass-tinged music (performed by him, Catherine McRae and Kate Ryan) that accompanies Mr. Findlay's raffish, ruminative guided tour. The actor is both friendly and rueful, hopeful and disgusted, as he coaxes us to try to put ourselves in his shoes, or perhaps those of all our fellow travelers (literal and otherwise) on this trip.

For "Love Story," the audience moves to the front of the house, to watch Mr. Harts — by himself on a naked stage — walk in circles and sit, and read (from a composition book) an account of one man's obsession with a pair of lovers he first saw in a diner. In contrast to Mr. Findlay's easygoing gruffness, Mr. Harts's tone is methodical and ritualistic, as are his movements.

As he chronicles what the stalking (let's face it) of this couple, he anchors his narrative with recitations of twinned words: "story board," "life cycle," "pool hall." That this fellow is probably — to use the diagnosis du jour — somewhere "on the spectrum" suggests how quick we've become in this anomic era to identify — and identify with — autism and its implicit detachment.

"Love Story" appropriately features tantalizing, shape-shifting projections by Janet Wong that summon urban views both panoramic and specific. We have the sense of a big world seen piecemeal, in small and obsessively focused increments.

Though it deftly uses 21st-century technology, Mr. Landsman's production is also steeped in the harsh sentimentality associated with literature from the early days of this country's industrialization. His voice here isn't so different from that of stark portraitists of unsung American lives likeSherwood Anderson and Edgar Lee Masters. That this nation is a lot more populous than it was then doesn't mean that it's any less lonely.