

PERFORMANCE ART

A Play In One Act

By Judy Klass

CHARACTERS

KILEY: A friend of the artist's – SHE is taken with experiments in what art can be and mean.

ERICA: SHE is a little more conventional, and unnerved when things get too experimental and weird.

SETTING

We seem to be in an art gallery that has been converted to look like a theater space – or are we?

TIME

The present.

AT RISE: KILEY AND ERICA wander out onto the stage, and peer at the audience, scrutinizing their faces.

ERICA
So ... this is it?

KILEY
This is it.

ERICA
And they're alive? They're not mechanical?

KILEY
(scoffing laugh)
Yeah, right. Like she has the budget to build row upon row of cyber-people. Do you have any idea what life is like for artists now?

ERICA
Artists can make a lot of money. If they're trendy enough.

KILEY
She's not trying to be *trendy*. She's experimenting with the whole art gallery experience in bold, new ways. Some people do appreciate it – but no, she's not rich, and it's not like we live in a country where there are grants for artists or ways for them –

ERICA
Okay, okay. Spare me the rant.
(A beat. She stares at the audience again – points)
So, then, like – if they're real ... Why are they doing it? Do they get paid?

KILEY
I don't know. I didn't ask her. But I assume they did not get paid. I just told you – she has no money.

ERICA
So, then ... why would they come and be part of this installation? And just sit there, and have us stare at them?

KILEY
Because they respect Hecuba. They respect her vision. They believe in her art.

ERICA

Kiley, seriously. Did her parents give her that name?

KILEY

What?

ERICA

Hecuba Rosenblatt. That is a truly terrible name. Did her parents do that to her, or did she do it to herself?

KILEY

I think she may have chosen it herself. She's forging her own identity.

ERICA

And you don't think that identity is maybe just a tad pretentious? Like this performance art installation, or whatever it is?

KILEY

As a matter of fact, no. I don't. I think she's doing daring and exciting work, and I'm proud to call her my friend. I know that a lot of people, consciously or subconsciously, have a problem with women artists – with the whole idea of Woman as Artist, instead of as Muse. They have a problem with a woman as a person with agency, as a person providing others with visual images and defying the ubiquitousness of the male gaze –

ERICA

Oh, stop it. Women are great as subjects or as objects. I have no problem with women artists. I like Georgia O'Keefe. I like Mary Cassatt. I was disappointed when I found out that Joan Miro was a guy – I always liked his work.

KILEY

But a woman changing the rules and shaking things up – that unsettles you. Even though you're a supposedly liberated woman yourself. And I find that very sad.

ERICA

I don't like trendy, pretentious experiments like this. Big, dead sharks in tanks full of formaldehyde. You know? Madonnas painted with elephant poop.

KILEY

That's a wonderful painting!

ERICA

Crucifixes submerged in piss.

KILEY

That's a beautiful photograph! Suffused with a kind of divine, spiritual light. If you didn't know how Serrano had done it, you would swear that God Herself was immersing that crucifix in Her love, Her glory, why can't you get past –

ERICA

Because I'm conventional. I guess. Plus, I don't like gimmicks. I don't like artists posing in their own art installations, eating lunch, or sleeping, or sitting in a box. You might as well have Harry Houdini or David Copperfield suspended from a building, you know? That, at least, would be less pretentious. And I don't like it when artists film themselves doing whatever mundane stuff and put it on a screen and call it art.

(indicates the audience with her hands spread wide)

Or this stuff. It's silly, it's a dead end. It's not what I go to a museum to see.

KILEY

Wow. The Republicans who slash and destroy the NEA must love you. You are every bit as dull, and narrow, and closed-minded as they are!

ERICA

I don't get all morally offended, or religiously offended, but I hate gimmicks, I hate Barnumism pretending that it's something really deep and significant, and another thing – I appreciate real craftsmanship. Some artists have the ability to paint life-like pictures, or see the world in some new, impressionistic way, and render it, with a style that's unforgettable, that's unlike anyone else's! And other people ... they don't have that skill, that talent. So – they either teach art in a school –

KILEY

Sure, as if schools still had the money to invest in art teachers!

ERICA

Or they come up with this stuff. And they say: “Oh, look at my new performance art installation! A bunch of people pretending to be an audience for an evening of theater, only instead of them watching a show, you watch them!” Whoop de doo.

KILEY

You’re just jealous because you didn’t think of it yourself. It seems too simple, and obvious to you, maybe, because you can’t even begin to think on such original terms –

ERICA

I don’t want to.

KILEY

And when an artist like Ai Weiwei films himself undergoing human rights violations and posts it to the web, that’s just Barnumism to you? That’s just trickery?

ERICA

He’s risking a hell of a lot more, when he does that, than Hecuba Rosenblatt ever has. And sometimes he builds things like fiberglass models of himself with his jailers – or that Bird’s Nest Olympic Stadium. He knows about craftsmanship – he knows about design.

KILEY

What if he has assistants creating the fiberglass statues for him? Just like so many of the old masters had assistants that helped with the execution of their projects? What if his great strength is his bold imagination and his willingness to question established rules, just like Hecuba does?

ERICA

Oh, please. What rules does Hecuba question?

KILEY

The comforting but completely arbitrary illusion of a line between the audience and the work being viewed – as if they don’t refract each other’s light, and modify each other!

KILEY (CONT'D)

As if art and audience were not in dialogue with each other, all the time! What Hecuba is doing here is as radical as when Andy Warhol painted a can of Campbell's soup or a picture of Marilyn Monroe and reminded us that art is a commodity, *everything* can be commodified, and art can't be separated from pop culture, and all dichotomies are illusions. That's what Hecuba is saying also, if you'd just throw out your bourgeois prejudices, for once, Erica, and open your mind and heart to something new. Embrace the Lacanian gaze!
(points to audience)

Look at them. They've been reacting to us discussing them. So, are we the performance art installation – or are they?

ERICA

I don't know. Does Hecuba know?

KILEY

What do you mean?

ERICA

I mean ... maybe they've been duped by your crazy friend, and maybe we have, too. Maybe they think they really *are* a theater audience, just like we think we're visiting a museum installation.

(beat)

Are you sure this space is a museum? It looks a hell of a lot like a theater to me.

KILEY

Hecuba modified the space to make it look like a theater. That's a crucial part of this piece.

ERICA

So, how could she afford to do that? You keep saying she's broke.

KILEY

I guess she cut a deal with some theater that will move in after the installation is dismantled. How is that important?

ERICA

How come other artists aren't in here? With pictures on the walls and so on?

KILEY

Because this is not a group show.

ERICA

How come it doesn't say "museum" or "gallery" outside?
How come it only says "Performance Art, by Hecuba
Rosenblatt"?

KILEY

Because "Performance Art" is the name of this piece.

ERICA

Yeah, either that, or "Performance Art" is the name of this
play – and we're it.

KILEY

Don't be ridiculous.

ERICA

Or both at the same time. It doesn't have to be either/or.
"All dichotomies are illusions," right? Maybe we're the
observers but we're also the art. Maybe we're being
commodified, by your manipulative friend, just like these
good people here. Should we ask them?

KILEY

No, leave them alone. You don't pester and harass people
Who are part of an installation.

ERICA

Why not? You think they've got some kind of code of no
response, like the guards outside of Buckingham Palace?

KILEY

No, but I think it's tacky and rude to try to disrupt an
installation.

ERICA

Okay, fine, whatever, can we get out of here now?

KILEY

Why? Why are you so unnerved by anything you don't
understand at first glance? Maybe real art shouldn't make
you comfortable – maybe it should make you
uncomfortable.

ERICA

Maybe cameras make me uncomfortable. You know?
What if Hecuba is filming this? What if we're going to
be the subjects of her next installation, for real?

KILEY

Why would she film this?

ERICA

She's one of those boring, narcissistic artists who films
things like herself sleeping, right?

KILEY

She recontextualizes those concepts. She had one show with
a film of her sleeping, where the camera focused on the rising
and falling of her breasts in her sleep, but she had red
plastic clown's noses on each of her nipples, which
completely deconstructed the traditional role of the woman as
art object, and how the female body is usually perceived as
passive and vulnerable or as an object of reverence –

ERICA

Great, good for her.

KILEY

With a witty, pointed subtext, to all her work on film, about
how we are constantly under surveillance now, by the NSA,
and internet providers, and stores and corporations, and how,
in a world of web cams and reality shows, the line between
public and private space has been hopelessly blurred –

ERICA

The point is, she's into cameras. Suppose she also wants to
destroy the dichotomy between – whatever – art and theater,
and theater and film ... And she's playing the role of the NSA
to make a political point? Suppose she's secretly filming us
right now, watching us with her camera, watching us watch
them watch us ... What right do we have to prevent her from
using it? I do not want to be a sucker, and I do not want to be
her bitch.

KILEY

What a paranoid, self-hating woman you are.

ERICA

Hey, you know what, fine, if you say so. I'm leaving.

(ERICA EXITS.)

KILEY

(glancing around nervously)

You wouldn't do that ... would you, Hecuba?

(to audience)

She wouldn't ... She didn't, right?

(KILEY EXITS. LIGHTS DOWN.)

END OF PLAY

WHY WE LIKE IT: *An insightful example of conceptual theatre that addresses timely and provocative questions about the nature of stage drama, the role and nature of the audience and the feminist playwright's struggle for identity. It is at the same time a cutting edge satire of the contemporary art scene and the problems introduced by the Minimalist movement and installation events. The implosive result is meta-theatre where the actors are the performance rather than participants and the audience is both subject and object. As Kiley says, 'the line between public and private space has been hopelessly blurred'. A brilliantly realized play with energy, style and dialogue that smacks.*

THE PLAYWRIGHT SPEAKS: So, to the degree that I'm satirizing these characters, I'm satirizing myself, as a feminist who sometimes takes herself too seriously, and as a person involved with creating performances and "art" who sometimes takes herself too seriously while involved in those pursuits. (I am Kiley. I am Erica. I am Hecuba Rosenblatt.) As for the ideas these two women argue about – I've been on both sides of the debate. I've seen beauty and interesting qualities in controversial art pieces, and at other times some of them have struck me as easy and gimmicky. I have various influences as a playwright, but I don't think any of them led, directly, to this piece. I was taken with the idea, in a ten-minute play, of characters not only removing the fourth wall, but actually peering at the audience, trying to figure out who these people sitting in rows are and what they are doing ... and the play came out of that. It does work well, and it gets nervous laughs from the audience, when performed. As pretentious as it may sound to talk about a play getting "reflexive" and "meta" – it actually does, a bit.

BIO: Seven of Judy's full-length plays have been produced. One, *Cell*, was produced in a mystery festival in Owensboro, Kentucky, got nominated for an Edgar and is published by Samuel French. Transatlantic was produced in NYC twice, Damage Control was produced in NYC once, After Tartuffe was produced in NYC once, Hackers and Heroes, co-written with Ron Reed, was produced in NYC once, Stop Me If You've Heard This One was produced in Nashville, Tennessee and Country Fried Murder was produced in Shawnee on Delaware, Pennsylvania, after winning in the Shawnee Playhouse competition. Stop Me If You've Heard This One won the Dorothy Silver Award. Judy's

unproduced full-length play *Hallway House* made the Second Round of the Austin Film Festival in the Stage Play category in 2019. Thirty-five of her one-act plays have been produced. One, *Untethered*, won the William Faulkner Literary Competition in the One Act Play category in 2019. More info about her can be found at www.judy-klass.com and many of her plays, short and long, produced and unproduced, need good homes. Judy is also a songwriter. She is from NYC/NJ, but she now lives in Nashville, TN and teaches at Vanderbilt University.