

CityBeat

REVIEW: 'Be Here Now' Asks Us to Do Just That

This world-premiere production at Cincinnati Playhouse asks poignant questions about life and happiness as it mixes humor with soul-searching

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"Be Here Now"'s Eva Kaminsky and Torsten Hillhouse *PHOTO: MIKKI SCHAFFNER* **CRITIC'S PICK**

In a time that often feels like nothing matters, *Be Here Now* bursts through the gloom and offers a new and uplifting perspective.

Be Here Now is a commissioned work — a world premiere for the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park by Deborah Zoe Laufer, a very busy playwright whose *Leveling Up* had its premiere at the Playhouse in 2013. It asks poignant questions about life and happiness throughout the 90-minute existential crisis of its main subject, Bari (Eva Kaminsky).

The play takes place in a small town in upstate New York, where Bari is a dryly humorous yet cynical ex-professor disdainfully working at a curio shop while toiling away at her doctoral dissertation on nihilism (the philosophic belief that nothing matters). Negativity seeps out of Bari at all moments, but never seems to penetrate the tireless optimism of co-worker Luanne (Emily Kratter) or shatter the rock-like confidence of childhood friend Patty (Michele Ragusa).

But that all changes the moment she meets Mike (Torsten Hillhouse), a scruffy local who collects garbage and brings life to the concept that one man's trash is another man's treasure. Set up on a blind date by Patty, a mutual companion, the two don't exactly hit it off right away. They are complete opposites.

In all things, where Bari sees the void, Mike sees the beauty. As these two starkly contrasting souls begin their curious first encounter, the date quickly turns from amusing to tragic, and propels the story from a fun small-town comedy to a meaningful search for happiness and companionship. *Be Here Now* is a story that takes the audience on an existential ride to the intersection of despondence and joy.

The play is brimming with vibrant characters that, in everyday life, might seem a bit overwhelming. However, superb direction by Portia Krieger and sincere performances make these characters come alive in a way that is both charming and electric. Kaminsky delivers an emotionally vulnerable performance as Bari, giving real meaning to the great questions of life.

As Mike, Hillhouse brilliantly melds personal devastations with a zest for life. Together, these two bring wildly different perspectives to *Be Here Now* that create a richer picture of life and happiness. These characters and their encounters blend to form a work that is ultimately about connecting to those around you in order to truly find yourself.

Because *Be Here Now* is performed in thrust in the Shelterhouse Theatre (meaning the audience is on three sides of the stage), there's a risk audience members will find

opportunities to zone out. However, the expertly crafted staging by Krieger was fantastic. The performances were done in a way that ensured no part of the audience felt blocked out or ignored. And the thrust staging actually lent intimacy to the production by allowing the audience to feel almost like participants in the emotional journey displayed onstage. At several moments during the production, there were audible reactions from the audience as events unfolded. This wasn't disruptive, but rather a unifying experience that appropriately fit the theme of the play.

Lighting designer Thomas C. Hase brought a gorgeous design sensibility that made the production even livelier. Harsh white light contrasted with rainbows of color to make the audience feel as if they could see exactly what the characters were experiencing. The costuming, designed by Gordon DeVinney, also was appropriate: Where dreary Bari wears dark, muted tones from head to toe to underscore her cynicism, Luanne wears bright blues and pinks to spotlight her quirky optimism and Patty's vivid red hair accentuates her fiery confidence.

The ending leaves you asking innumerable questions about life and the pursuit of happiness. Are we born with our outlook, or do we choose how we view our life and the world around us? Is it a mixture of both? What is happiness? Why do we seek it and how do we obtain it? Ultimately, *Be Here Now* is a lovely production that will leave you with a new appreciation for life.

Be Here Now is onstage at the Playhouse in the Park through March 11. Tickets/more information: <http://www.cincyplayhouse.com>.