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STAGES

In playwright's view, happiness industry is a bummer

By **Joel Brown** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT AUGUST 28, 2014



DAVID MARSHALL

R. Bobby (top) and Felix Teich in Sleeping Weazel's production of Charlotte Meehan's "27 Tips for Banishing the Blues."

Why 27?

"Because I like the sound of 27," Charlotte Meehan says, laughing. "27 is odd, as odd as it is to say there are any answers to this problem."

Meehan's script for "27 Tips for Banishing the Blues" is subtitled "a multimedia tragi-parody of America's happiness industry." Performances by her troupe, Sleeping Weazel, begin Saturday at Boston Playwrights' Theatre. The play looks at depression in America, specifically casting a harsh comic light on charlatans who try to profit from it.

The Nutritionist character recommends, "One Essence of sepia for loss of general libido, sadness, and weariness. Pine for guilt and self-reproach. Sweet chestnut

for unbearable anguish.” The Astrologer says, “The Libra Moon’s objectivity helps us to see where our lives are out of kilter.”

“I have noticed the proliferation of self-help people and products over many years and have always found a particular cruelty in selling miracle cures to those suffering from depression,” Meehan says. “Imagine seeing an astrologer for diabetes or Parkinson’s disease!”

In other words, don’t come expecting to get those 27 tips. The play is a fast, free-associating, not-especially-linear examination of TV gurus and New Age charlatans, and the people who are seduced by their promises.

Among the victims in “27 Tips” are an 11-year-old boy and his severely depressed mother, whose story grows more ominous as the play goes along. “It’s very, very sad,” Meehan says. “He really does love his mother, and his mother loves him. They have a lot of loyalty to each other. She’s never cruel to him. She’s depressed, and she’s not getting the help she needs. Really my indictment there is not on the mother, it’s on the culture.”

Meehan identifies with those suffering from depression because she does, too. “I am very familiar with the fog of depression, and I am also very familiar with fighting through it,” she says.

“I am actually a very happy person. Depression is a chemical imbalance,” and hers is successfully controlled with therapy and medication.

But the anniversary of her husband’s death or tragedies in the news, like the Sandy Hook shootings, can be especially difficult. “It seems to me that we all have strong emotional reactions when these kinds of things happen, and that’s what makes us human. Depression is just a more debilitating response.”

You may be surprised to hear that “27 Tips” is billed as the funniest of the plays in Meehan’s “The Problem With People” trilogy. It’s the middle play between “Sweet Disaster,” which premiered in Providence in 2008, and “Real Realism,” which Sleeping Weazel presented last year. She’s hoping for the return of “Sweet Disaster” next year, completing the trilogy in reverse order.

The trilogy grew out of her own broken heart. She married British filmmaker, novelist, and theater artist David Hopkins in June 2001, just after the birth of their daughter, Margot. They were living near ground zero at the time and were traumatized by the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The family moved to Massachusetts in the summer of 2002, but Hopkins was soon diagnosed with colon cancer and died in 2004. (Meehan has since remarried.)

It was around the time they learned of Hopkins’s cancer that Meehan was diagnosed with depression, “but I’m pretty sure I’ve had [it] since I was 12 years old.”

Now she's using her familiar, kaleidoscopic playwriting technique to try to capture the experience. Most of the 11 actors in the ensemble cast play more than one character, and most of those are identified only by profession (therapist, astrologer, patient, famous chef). Three of the actors appear only in pre-recorded videos seen on three large screens at the back of the stage, mingling with various projections by set designer Seághan McKay.

"I'm not trying to create the verisimilitude of a Eugene O'Neill play. I'm not trying to create that kind of continuity," says Meehan. "I'm trying to create a discontinuity. Depression itself creates a fracture in your narrative, because you're sort of in a fog.

"And really, the lives we lead are fractured in the ways my plays are fractured. We do so many different things in a day, and we sort of morph into different people." "It's sort of like pointillism," says "27 Tips" director Kenneth Prestininzi, who has worked with Meehan on and off for several years. "There's all of these shards of insight and dramatic consequence, that one has to take a step back to see how they all relate to each other."

Also a playwright, Prestininzi is artistic director of the Brown/Trinity Playwrights Repertory Theatre. He says the influences under which he and Meehan work are not traditional theater artists like O'Neill or Arthur Miller but rather dance mavens Martha Graham and Pina Bausch and writer Gertrude Stein.

In "27 Tips" there are also occasional dance breaks, which might count as a tip if you really want one. "As Ken says, this is just a moment when the play is taking a break from itself," Meehan says, laughing again. "It happens and you're like, WTF? I love that."

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