

Theatre Review: Untitled Peter Tripp Project invites viewers into a surreal waking dream

The show explores exhaustion and endurance through a series of hallucinatory set pieces

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Untitled Peter Tripp Project. Photo by Shelby Fenlon

I can't tell you where this performance took place, because it's a secret, but I can tell you *about* it. It's a ballroom, at a place in East Vancouver where you would never expect to find a ballroom, unless you already knew it was there. The room has a certain down-at-heel glamour, with its mirrored pillars, chandeliers, and wooden dance floor.

I may or may not have overheard some talk that there are plans afoot to turn this space into...something. A speakeasy-style cabaret is my best guess, but whatever the case, its very oddness makes it a good fit for *Untitled Peter Tripp Project*—largely because the room has the feel of a place that hasn't been used for much of anything since 1959.

The show isn't set in that year, per se. In fact, it isn't really set in any specific year, nor is it a play so much as a series of hallucinatory set pieces. The titular Tripp was a New York City DJ who, in '59, stayed awake for eight-and-a-half days as part of a publicity stunt.

As Curtain Razors' Jayden Pfeifer told Stir recently, *Untitled Peter Tripp Project* is not an attempt to tell the disc jockey's story; instead, he and his fellow Regina-based artists, Johanna Bundon and Lee Henderson, used Tripp's sleep-deprivation experiment as a springboard to explore “themes around that idea of exhaustion and the compulsion to perform and what happens to the body and the brain through that kind of endurance of sleeplessness”.

Bound together by those thematic threads but not connected via any narrative through-line, the individual segments of *Untitled Peter Tripp Project* come and go in a waking-dream flow, like the fragmented perceptions of someone who has pushed past the point of exhaustion and arrived at some other fluid state of reality.

In no particular order: a man (Pfeifer) sits in a chair, pulls one of his shoes off, and systematically tears it to pieces; a woman (Bundon) approaches a microphone stand (sans microphone) and performs rhythmic movements that occasionally coalesce into coherent dancing while a chopped-and-looped recording of Elvis Presley singing

“Are You Lonesome Tonight?” plays in the background; a man (Henderson) reads a short essay about his ex-wife’s struggles with myoclonic twitch, but has to keep starting over when his own hypnagogic jerk repeatedly interrupts his progress; a grimly smiling woman (guest artist Tess Degenstein) is compelled to jump rope to the point of aching fatigue, and each time she tries to stop, the rhythmic clapping of stone-faced onlookers forces her to keep going.

It’s all deeply weird, arguably made even more so by the fact that it is staged in a darkened room where the audience is free to wander and watch the proceedings from any number of vantage points. On the night I attended, there were moments when the lack of separation between performers and observers made things almost uncomfortably intimate, which I suspect was entirely by design.

The show’s sound design, which combines old radio broadcasts with music from the ’50s (naturally), lends it a beautifully surreal quality that, combined with the visual elements, adds up to something akin to a dream sequence out of a David Lynch movie.

I just hope that when it’s all over, the performers will get to have a nice long sleep.

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John Lucas

John Lucas has covered music and the arts for longer than he cares to think about. He can also be found playing his guitar in dodgy rehearsal spaces and low-rent venues in and around Vancouver.