

'Low Level Panic': Mirror Images
Three Women Unhappily Explore Sex, Society and Themselves
[FINAL Edition]

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A bathroom's walls are covered with magazine photos of women, some naked, all of them beautiful. A disabled woman is lying nude in the tub. And her roommate is in a chair beside her, perusing some porn.

From the second you spy the set of Open Circle's "Low Level Panic," a drama in which three twenty-something women discuss body image and sex, you suspect it's not going to be subtle.

The next 90 minutes prove you right. And the heavy-handedness isn't just in the staging. "Low Level Panic" won British playwright Clare McIntyre a Samuel Beckett Theatre Award in 1989, but in this production's playbill notes, even director Suzanne Richard admits that her initial reaction to the work was that it was merely "a fair play."

Richard, Open Circle's co-founder and artistic director, became confident, however, that she and her crew could unearth the finer points of what first came off as pages of women's-studies diatribe. She succeeds only partly.

In the opening scene, Mary (Jessica Lynn Rodriguez), who's pretty but not slim, is angrily paging through a girlie magazine she found in a trash bin. She asks Jo (Selene Faer), an earnest if naive-sounding question: "Why do guys get off on this stuff?" Meanwhile, Jo, who sees herself as fat, fantasizes about how fabulous her life would be if she were tall and thin and beautiful.

Mary's frustration over glorified body images is valid, but at this point in the play her fury seems abnormal: If Jo mentions meeting a dashing man in her daydream, Mary rebukes her with "He might be repulsive" or "He might push you around!" In the next scene, however, the reason becomes clear: Mary steps in front of the stage and delivers a monologue about the night she was sexually assaulted on her way home from work.

The attack's reenactment is disturbing enough, accompanied by a recording of the two men's approach (with the voices of Michael Dove and Brandon Thane Wilson). Then Mary shows us just where they grabbed her and lets out a scream -- and in 1409 Playbill Cafe's tiny space, that yell is pretty jarring -- before the lights go down.

More deeply affecting, though, is the aftermath. Mary blames the fact that she was wearing a skirt for the attack, and she later becomes upset while primping for a party. (With a frame around the front of the set, the actresses, including K. Clare Johnson's seldom-seen third roommate, Celia, face the audience as they examine themselves in an implied mirror.)

Mary feels disgusting in her clingy, strapless dress. Like she's inviting men to whistle and gawk. Like a "sitting duck." It's typical thinking for victims of sexual assault, and something that the Oprahs of the

world have been trying vehemently to reverse. McIntyre's gut-wrenching first-person confession of this attitude -- maximized by the vulnerability and angst that Rodriguez brings to the role -- makes it clear, however, that no amount of logic can erase it.

The rest of "Low Level Panic," unfortunately, is all talk and little insight. It goes without saying that the women's primary obsession -- the importance of looks in modern society -- is already a well-trod subject. Sometimes McIntyre expresses the issue with interesting dialogue ("I'm not repulsive," Jo says, "but I'm not right, either") but more often the characters come off as whiny and melodramatic ("Why did he have to choose our dumpster?" Mary asks, referring to whomever discarded the explicit magazine).

The actresses all do a creditable job, with Faer and Johnson mercifully making the most of the play's few attempts at humor. The production's highlights, however, don't quite make up for its navel-gazing hammer -- at its lowest moment, Jo's disgusted analysis of another of her fantasies is followed by a song whose chorus is "poor thing" -- and the characters' unnatural and repetitious speechifying quickly makes "Low Level Panic" feel even worse than the worst "Sex and the City" episode ever.

When Jo at one point asks Mary, "What's going on inside your head?" the audience might not chuckle, but it's arguably the drama's biggest laugh.

Low Level Panic, by Clare McIntyre. Directed by Suzanne Richard. Set, Klyph Stanford; lighting, Marianne Meadows; costumes, Melanie Clark; sound, Ian Armstrong.

Approximately 90 minutes. Through Tuesday at 1409 Playbill Cafe, 1409 14th St. NW. Call 240-683-0305 or visit www.opencircletheatre.org.

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