

THEATRE REVIEW

The audience is in on it

Cast of seasoned improvisers bolsters a theatregoer plucked from his seat in Rebecca Northan's latest 'spontaneous theatre' creation

Undercover
Created by Rebecca Northan with Bruce Horak
Directed by Rebecca Northan
Starring an audience member
At the Tarragon Theatre in Toronto

REVIEWED BY
J. KELLY NESTRUCK

It's not often that I end up yelling in frustration at an opening night – but I found myself breaking with critical decorum and shouting with critical decorum and shouting at the centre of Rebecca Northan's new mystery *Undercover* this week at the Tarragon Theatre. "Look at her wrist!" I hollered. "Look at her wrist!"

I just couldn't stand it any more – after watching the detective in question investigate a murder for more than an hour, but miss obvious clues and question subjects in a circular manner. There were many long, excruciating silences.

To be fair to the person playing the rookie detective, he was in fact a rookie performer – playing the character for the first time amid a cast of six seasoned improvisers.

Indeed, the man playing the detective wasn't a professional performer – he's a master's student who was plucked from the audience to become the star of Northan's latest "spontaneous theatre" creation.

The premise of *Undercover*, which is opening the Tarragon Theatre's 2017-18 season and goes to Vertigo Theatre in Calgary in the new year, is that a different audience member is selected each evening to join the Toronto police force.

After briefly learning the ropes at HQ from Sergeant Roberta Collins (played by Northan, an effortlessly natural and unaffected improviser), he or she is sent undercover to an estate outside the



In Rebecca Northan's *Undercover*, every performance tasks a different audience member with solving a murder.

city where an art auction is being held.

The initial assignment is to find out information about how Lia Da Costa (Christy Bruce), the leader of a famous crime family, is connected to the others in attendance – a city councillor planning a run for mayor (Dennis Cahill), a legally blind painter (Bruce Horak, who is actually a legally blind painter in addition

to being a skilled improviser) and a stable boy named Daniel (Jamie Northan, very witty).

Right before intermission, however, the lights go out during a thunderstorm – and a character is killed during the blackout. It's up to the audience member to solve the murder.

Undercover sounds like a show you'd be more likely to see at Second City in Toronto or Loose

Moose Theatre in Calgary than on stage at Tarragon, one of the country's foremost theatres for new plays.

But, almost a decade ago, Rebecca Northan – who trained with all the other cast members at Loose Moose – made a strong case for improvisation as performance art with a show called *Blind Date* and found an entry into theatre companies around the country.

In that hit that she would eventually tour to London and New York, Northan donned a red nose and became a single French clown named Mimi – who would bring a male audience member on stage to go on a date with her. She was funny, she was flirtatious – and she got astonishing things out of her amateur scene partners about their lives and their dreams and their views on love.

Utterly charming, *Blind Date* trained a whole host of Mimis over the years – and even spawned a spinoff in which gay and lesbian improvisers went on same-sex dates.

While managing that phenomenon, Northan tried to make bigger shows based around the same principle – the full-show participation of a single audience member. Having seen *Legend Has It* (a fantasy/adventure show) in Calgary and now *Undercover*, I'm not sure the concept expands so easily into other realms. The more story there is to cover, the more characters there are on stage, the less easy it is to get to know the human plucked from the audience – and the easier it is to intimidate them. It feels like any improv show you might see but with an untrained performer at the centre.

On the opening night of *Undercover*, Northan and her team of improvisers perhaps chose an unusually low-key gentleman because there were so many actors and directors and critics in

attendance. But he often seemed overwhelmed by the proceedings. He didn't share much about his real self and, while it was fun to watch him snoop around set designer Glenn Davidson's Clue-inspired set full of secret compartments, he rarely took the lead in the investigation.

Indeed, the rookie was so quiet that at one point Northan suggested, in her detective character, that they try a new interrogation method – simply staying silent until a suspect fessed up.

Undercover apparently has a different ending every night, so I'm not sure a spoiler alert is necessary to say that on opening night the police officer played by Northan was secretly involved with one of the suspects. I had an inkling by intermission – and I imagine an audience member with a little more knowledge of mysteries might have considered that possibility from the outset.

But part of the deal with Northan's "spontaneous theatre" is that it is meant to be a safe space for audience participation; she, for instance, allows her guests to take a "time out" any time they want one. It's a fundamental flaw for her to both play the role of the trusted guide – and to be involved in the crime.

With another audience member in the driver's seat, it would have seemed like a neat twist – but in this case it seemed like a dirty trick. And, at a certain point, I felt someone had to holler to help the guy out.

It's possible that another performance of *Undercover* might be heart-warming or hilarious – so I won't assign a star rating. But I can't recommend it yet if there's the possibility that you might end up with the ambling, only intermittently funny mystery that occurred the night I was there.

Undercover (tarragontheatre.com) continues to Oct. 29.

Globe style
Every Saturday
TO SUBSCRIBE CALL
1-800-387-5400
THE GLOBE AND MAIL

"THE PERFORMANCE OF A LIFETIME" - *Variety*
HARRY DEAN STANTON is
LUCKY
DAVID LYNCH RON LIVINGSTON
ED BEGLEY JR. TOM SKERRIT
DIRECTED BY JOHN CARROLL LYNCH
STARTS OCT 6! TIFF BELL LIGHTBOX! RYLAND CINEMA! FIRST ONTARIO PERFORMING ARTS CENTRE! filmswelike

"STRONGER" TRANSCENDS...
ONE OF THOSE RARE INSPIRATIONAL FILMS THAT EARNS ITS INSPIRATION. JAKE GYLLENHAAL IS PHENOMENAL."
ROGEREBERT.COM
"THE RARE MOVIE THAT MAKES LIFE BETTER FOR HAVING SEEN IT"
ABC 7 NY
"JAKE GYLLENHAAL TRIUMPHS. AN OSCAR-WORTHY PERFORMANCE."
DEADLINE
"TATIANA MASLANY IS SUPERB."
Los Angeles Times
"ONE OF THE BEST FILMS OF 2017"
NATIONAL REVIEW
OFFICIAL SELECTION
tiff
JAKE GYLLENHAAL TATIANA MASLANY
STRONGER
BASED ON THE INSPIRING TRUE STORY
LIONSGATE
COARSE LANGUAGE, GORY SCENES, DISTURBING CONTENT
#StrongerMovie
NOW PLAYING CHECK THEATRE DIRECTORY FOR LOCATIONS AND SHOWTIMES



AGA KHAN MUSEUM LAPIS BALL

THANK YOU FOR HELPING US
CONNECT CULTURES THROUGH ART

DINNER SPONSOR THE HASSANALLY FAMILY
ENTERTAINMENT SPONSOR TD
COCKTAIL SPONSOR TRIMARK

GOLD TABLE SPONSORS

- | | |
|--|--|
| Aga Khan Museum Board of Directors | Mohamedali Ratanshi and Sakarkhanu Ratanshi and Family |
| Amin and Nigar Khimji, Shirin Group | Nadir and Shabin Mohamed |
| Amir Rupani and Family | Orbital Technologies Inc. |
| Anonymous | Scotiabank |
| Aziz Manji Family | Shahsultan and Hanif Amirali Lalani Family |
| Dhuka and Khawja Families | Shirin Group and Lodginvest Corporation |
| Greater Houston Retailers Cooperative Association Inc. | Steel Canada Resources Limited |
| Janmohamed Nagji Jinah Family | Vellani and Kheraj Families |
| Moez Mangalji and Akbar Mohamed | Wholistic Health Training and Research Centre |

AGAKHANMUSEUM.ORG

AGA KHAN MUSEUM

OPERA ATELIER | 17-18
"Seldom has Mozart's Figaro seemed so fresh and its comedy so sublime" — *Stage Door*
The MARRIAGE of FIGARO MOZART
OCT. 26 – NOV. 4, 2017
ELGIN THEATRE, 189 YONGE ST.
TICKETS: 1.855.622.ARTS (2787)
Season Presenting Sponsor BMO
Season Underwriter Mocambo
Photo: Bruce Zinger
OPERAATELIER.COM
BUY NOW! TICKETS START AT JUST \$39

PRINTED AND DISTRIBUTED BY PRESSREADER
PressReader.com +1 604 278 4604
COPYRIGHT AND PROTECTED BY APPLICABLE LAW
pressreader