

CURRENT REVIEWS

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For the Want of a Horse

Chris Field's Echo Theater has always been a place where the walls feel thin, not because of the architecture or the occasional sound of the Amtrak trains roaring by behind the reclaimed warehouse space, but because the emotional stakes of their productions tend to leak directly into the laps of the audience. Their latest brave and unapologetic world premiere, *For Want of a Horse* by Olivia Dufault, is no exception. It is a startling, thrillingly bizarre and off-the-wall interrogation of the limits of human connection and, more specifically, a rigorous deconstruction of the word empathy.

We often treat empathy as a soft, passive emotion, a feeling for someone or something. In the hands of Dufault, however, who has spent her career exploring the visceral boundaries of the "other"—vividly explored in her previous and most notable work, the cockfighting drama *Year of the Rooster*—her Quixote-esque mission is to blend the outlandish with the visceral as she moves away from traditional domestic tropes. This time out, she insists we accept the concept of empathy as a grueling, active labor by introducing us to a third wheel that defies easy categorization: in this case, a horse named Q-Tip, a symbol for tackling the validation of a reality that's not your own, even when that reality is presented in a language you don't speak.

Dufault's *For Want of a Horse* is a radical labor revolving around two characters who beg to be seen. At the center of this hurricane is Griffin Kelly in a remarkable turn as Q-Tip, who becomes the catalyst for a couple's domestic dissolution. Calvin and Bonnie (Joey Stromberg and Jenny Soo) are young marrieds living a basically quiet suburban life until their world is upended when Calvin confesses his long repressed sexual attraction—to horses.

Bonnie, a kindergarten teacher who views herself to be a progressive and supportive partner, refuses to judge her husband. Instead of leaving him, she encourages Calvin to embrace his true self, believing that their love is strong enough to withstand this revelation, ultimately suggesting they bring a horse into their lives to keep their marriage intact. They acquire Q-Tip, a huge Arabian mare who in her monologues to us reveals she is both dependent on ancient, steadfast realities and detached from human morality at the same time.

Calvin finds a sense of community and liberation in his new romance while also sharing a kinship with his friend PJ (Steven Culp), someone he met in a zoophile chatroom who shares his proclivities and is himself in a committed relationship with a dog.

Soon Bonnie begins to realize her intellectual commitment to radical empathy is in direct conflict with her emotional reality. Her attempts to be the perfect, understanding wife lead her into a spiral of isolation and resentment while Q-Tip remains an enigmatic center of the conflict, an innocent party caught in the middle of a very human psychological crisis.

As the situation becomes increasingly volatile, *For Want of a Horse* forces a confrontation over the nature of consent and the limits of unconditional love, shifting deftly from a dark comedy about taboo desires into a tragic examination of how far one person will go to save—or destroy—a relationship.

As Calvin and Bonnie struggle to navigate the presence of Q-Tip, we see the systemic failure of their own fragile bond. The title, evoking the “for want of a nail” proverb, suggests that a single failure of empathy can lead to a total collapse. If we cannot perform the radical act of seeing the being standing in front of us, the entire kingdom of any relationship is lost. As the couple’s relationship buckles under the weight of the comely mare’s presence, we see that the want of a horse is really the want of recognition. The play suggests that the collapse of our social and personal structures stems from a failure to perform the radical act of empathy—the kind that requires us to look past the snorts and neighs of our differences to find the sentient being beneath.

The cast is uniformly golden, although the other three fine actors bow to the haunting performance of Kelly, who is nothing short of brilliant, delivering a true masterclass in physicality. As a transgender artist, Kelly brings a meta-textual weight to the role that cannot be ignored.

There’s a profound irony in watching a human being inhabit a character that the world refuses to see as human, demanding recognition while being met only with confusion or dismissal. Without the crutch of a literal costume, she conveys the equine spirit through a tilt of the jaw, a sharp exhale, and a restless, powerful energy. While the audience is gifted with Q-Tip’s richly poetic internal monologues, revealing a soul of immense depth, the human characters onstage

hear only the snorts and neighs of an animal, creating a heartbreaking empathy gap that mirrors the experience of anyone who has ever had to fight to be seen as their authentic self.

The production values at the Echo Company's home in the Atwater Village Theatre complex remain as suitably austere and top-tier as always on Alex Mollo's simple yet effective set that leans into the claustrophobia of the setting, forcing the audience to sit in the discomfort of the aforementioned "other," making it impossible to look away from the mirror Dufault has held up to our own capacity for connection.

It is a concept that could have been more fully and successfully explored were it not for the production's only Achilles' heel: the clunky and pedestrian staging by director Elana Luo. With a stage as wide and physically accessible at the Echo's well-trod (if you'll excuse the pun) space, Luo's choice to have her actors drag the same clunky furniture on and off over and over again in blue light was a total distraction when the omnipresent bed that becomes a bench and a chest utilized for costume changes could have easily become stationary objects on various areas of the stage instead captured by Matthew Richter's usual imaginative lighting plot.

Even with that significant druther, *For Want of a Horse* is an uncannily significant production, a take-no-prisoners piece of theatre that manages to be both intellectually rigorous and deeply visceral. It isn't just a play about a horse; it is a play about the exhaustion of existing in a world that demands you translate yourself into a recognizable form, emerging as a riveting, beautifully acted, and courageously off-centered piece that doesn't just ask for your applause—it asks for your evolution.

Dufault is truly a groundbreaking wordsmith, an architect of the strangely whimsical and a potentially fearless voice in contemporary theatre. Her history as a trans woman writing for the stage, screen, and even comic books, informs every line of this script. She has a singular gift for taking an absurd premise and using it to slice open the most private nerves of a relationship. She asks us: Can you love something you don't understand? The saga of Q-Tip and who really needs what more, lingers long after the house lights come up, forcing you to wonder what horses in your own life you've been failing to truly hear.

THROUGH MAY 25: Echo Theater Company, Atwater Village Theatre, 3269 Casitas Av., LA. EchoTheaterCompany.com or 747.350.8066