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Comme Toujours Here I Stand Molly Hickok and Chris Giarmo of Big Dance Theater performing at the Kitchen in Chelsea.

Reality and Illusion Meet, Sometimes Changing Places

After seeing Big Dance Theater's "Comme Toujours Here I Stand," at the Kitchen on Sunday night, several unanalytical thoughts crowded into my head:

Why aren't Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar, who founded this company in 1991, more famous? Why isn't this playing to large crowds? How can it cost only \$15? When can I see it again?

"Comme Toujours," a theatrical adaptation of the screenplay of Agnès Varda's 1962 film, "Cléo From 5 to 7," is a brilliantly entertaining hall of mirrors. It reflects on the nature of film and live theater by creating film and live theater before our eyes. It contemplates mortality and identity. It effortlessly evokes an Anglo-Saxon idea of French films: the heady blur of intellectualism and aestheticism, narcissism and self-analysis. And it keeps us asking an important question: what will happen next?

The story plays out on several levels. There is Ms. Varda's screenplay, which details two hours in the life of Cléo (a pitch-

perfect Molly Hickok), a Parisian pop singer awaiting the results of a biopsy. There are the actors who appear to be making a film based on this screenplay. And there is the construction of "Comme Toujours" itself, which unfurls as the performers change clothes; push furniture, cameras and screens around the stage; and create live video.

That video (by Jeff Larson) frequently amplifies the onstage scenes through close-up or partial views of characters' faces; recorded footage, too, is juxtaposed upon stage action in a Wooster Group-like game of illusion.

And it is indeed fun. Ms. Parson and Mr. Lazar retain just enough ambiguity in the constant breakdown and reconstruction of illusion (it's the film; oh, now it isn't) to keep us paying close attention. The subtle mix of music, the '60s-chic clothes (by Claudia Stephen) and the wonderfully evocative lighting by Joe Levasseur, all — like the performers — play their parts to perfection.

"Comme Toujours" may not be perfect: the pace flags slightly toward the end, and an extended dance sequence feels a little flat. But those are small quibbles in this fun-house meditation on theater, its workings and its dazzling results.

Big Dance Theater will perform through Saturday at the Kitchen, 512 West 19th Street, Chelsea; (212) 255-5793, thekitchen.org.