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Time Out

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Miranda July: *The Swan Tool*
By Miranda July. Dir. July. Music by Zak Love. Digital production by Mitsu Hadeishi. The Kitchen (see Off-Off Broadway).

Of all the strange onstage duets, Miranda July's dance with a bag of helium certainly ranks up there. However, in the context of July's surreal and haunting new work, the pairing is weirdly appropriate. Both partners are graceful and delicate, and the floating object responds readily to her lead. But whereas the makeshift balloon is transparent and wants to ascend, July's character is opaque and driven by a need to bury herself alive.

A rising young filmmaker and performance artist from Portland, Oregon, July plays Lisa Cobb, the neurotic employee of an insurance company who likens her life to a bad menu—full of undesirable choices. One morning, Lisa tells us, she decides to stuff herself into a garbage bag and inter herself in the backyard. Having accomplished this morbid (and physically impossible) operation, she returns to the world of corporate cubicles, only to find herself obsessing about that thing underground. By now, it should be obvious that *Tool* follows its own dream logic. Lisa, speaking into a head mike, muses that the thing she buried, after rotting for a while, "wouldn't be a girl...it wouldn't have a face. But it would still be a mammal." The aforementioned bag comes into the picture when Lisa describes a man who tests the office air every

day by filling bags with it and seeing if they rise or sink.

Claustrophobia and loneliness in modern life are the themes explored in this solo, which is augmented by DJ Zak Love's Muzaky score and a lot of gee-whiz digital video compositing from a small army of cinematographers and editors. July calls the work a "live movie," and sure enough, she stands on a raised platform between two screens (one at waist level), with images behind her creating a lively and amusing backdrop. In the most effective sequences, a long dolly shot of row upon row of office cubicles is matched by July, who walks in place beside the screen, giving the illusion of movement.

Among the visual bells and whistles are screens within screens and onscreen extras for whom July (with impressive vocal changes) provides the voice. At times, the animated effect reminds one of trippy cartoon shorts from *Sesame Street*. One mystifying video segment shows what appears to be a gallery inhabited by glowing female figures walking around, inspecting a constantly morphing painting on a wall. In another, a man and woman taking a stroll in a picture-perfect park stumble across a hole in the brilliant green grass and react as if they've found a corpse.

With a Lynchian flair for the mundane and the macabre, and passages of lovely writing, *Tool* stays with you long after its 45 minutes, its stylish technical effects firmly anchored by July's humorous, sympathetic performance.—David Cote