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Through a funnel darkly, with Michael Portnoy at The Kitchen

by *Ivan Talijancic*

As I was leaving the upstairs gallery at The Kitchen last Wednesday night, thinking about what to tell you about the performance I had just seen, “You have never seen a game show quite like this” kept coming to mind. Rewind.

I am waiting in the theater lobby, along

with a small group of other visitors, when the usher escorts us up the stairs to a darkened gallery, and, with a dictatorial authority, arranges us in a single file around a wooden structure resembling an oversized funnel. Our escorts then proceeds to manipulate our arms, one by one, arm straight, hand in a fist, a single finger sticking out, while a quiet buzz of whispering voices emanates from the funnel. The wait is prolonged, which only makes me more curious to find out what’s inside. Next, a panel in the structure slides open, and I am led inside the funnel – along with my cohorts – by a madcap couple in deconstructed business suits who immediately proceed to show us who’s boss by assigning



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spots for us to occupy along the leaning wall – a task we pursue with some degree of difficulty, since the floor surface is shaped like an oversized ball. When I finally settle in my spot along the leaning wall, I feel very much off-balance, which – as it turns out – is exactly what my hosts had in mind for me for the duration of this evening’s proceeding.

No sooner than the man (Michael Portnoy himself) presents himself as the “Rigid Designator”, and his female counterpart as “Modifa”, do I understand that I have inadvertently become a participant in a game show of sorts, the likes of which I’ve certainly never experienced before. Everything in this new world I inhabit is decidedly off-kilter: from the tilted walls, to the host’s outfits (entire panels of their otherwise normal-looking suits are missing, baring their backs and their thighs), to their dictatorial behavior, down to the frustratingly unfathomable lingo in which they address me – it’s as if I had been abducted and transported to the set of a po-mo production of *Alice*. As the game show begins, our hosts introduce us to “gnoses” – abstractly shaped black clay figures that look appealing but also a bit scary, like some alien species’ chess figures – and two teams, comprised of three audience members, each paired a different gnosis, are made to compete against each other, supposedly with the task of defining the function of those figurines. Is that the true purpose of this competition? One can’t be exactly sure, as the instructions given for the duration of the evening are spoken in such gobbledygook of words that sound remotely familiar, but probably excavated from such deep recesses of the Webster’s dictionary that only PhD linguists (or astrophysicists?) have a shot at discerning what they are told... or close to it.

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Thankfully, there are only two “semifinals” before the third, final game is played, in which the winning teams from the first two rounds face off. The sense of disease pervades throughout, and yet Portnoy manages to keep it all charmingly frustrating, both by having a good sense of timing (the piece goes on for only a bit longer than half an hour) and by a tongue-in-cheek attitude he endows the work with, which helps *27 Gnosis* steer clear of what could otherwise be an exercise in unnecessary pretentiousness. As it was, I walked out of the funnel not quite certain of what it was exactly that I had just experienced, but amusingly so.

<http://www.bachtrack.com/review-the-kitchen-27-gnosis-michael-portnoy>