

Pain's labyrinth

In her new one-woman show, filmmaker, director and author Miranda July delves into breakup hell. By **Gia Kourlas**

Miranda July is perhaps too down-to-earth to be giddy about her forthcoming book, or even the landslide success of her first feature-length film, *Me and You and Everyone We Know*. But she does experience little flashes of, as she puts it, "Yeah—crazy!"

One such instance occurred back in September, after her short story "Something That Needs Nothing" was published in *The New Yorker*. She was on a plane when she noticed seven passengers—all men—reading the same issue. "I thought, Any of them could be reading my story right now—about really weird personal stuff," July, 33, recalls in a phone interview from Los Angeles. "It's only in little flickers that it can feel like anything at all. But mostly it's just astounding how much everything feels the same. I'm still bored, I'm still lonely."

And she's not rich, either. Since *Me and You* won a slew of awards in 2005—at Sundance and Cannes—July has made the transition from Portland, Oregon, indie artist to a potentially powerful directorial force. Her financial situation, sadly, is another matter. "I didn't make any money from the movie," she says. "Stupidly, I didn't join any unions, so I don't get residuals. I've been living off of my book advance." That she's pouring much of it into a new work proves her commitment to live performance. On March 1, she returns to the Kitchen with *Things We Don't Understand and Definitely Are Not Going to Talk About*.

Following 2000's *Love Diamond* and 2001's *The Suan Tool*, the new work, set to a score by Jon Brion, features July playing multiple characters (this is typical) to create a visceral landscape about a couple grappling with heartbreak and obsession after the woman has an affair. "She is a dancer who is somewhat paralyzed," July

says. "You don't really see her dance most of the time, which is handy because I'm not a dancer. I do do a dance, which you'll have to forgive me for."

Debra Singer, executive director of the Kitchen, has been following July's work since 2000 and, in 2002, curated her in the Whitney Biennial. "I love the highly imaginative way that she constructs these story lines," Singer says. "There's often a kind of continuous strain of issues—love and loneliness and connection and alienation—that courses through the work, whether it's in the written word, on the stage, or in video or film."

For each show, July will enlist a real couple from the audience to perform alongside her. "I never know what's going to happen," she says. "At this point, I feel that is the reason for me to keep doing performance. After the movie, I was pretty emptied out. I felt like, I'll take creativity where it comes, and it just so happened that the ideas I was having were live. I needed a space where I felt free, where there weren't expectations. Performance will always be that for me because there's nothing to sell."

Things We Don't Understand is more than an opportunity to see July (and her cult fans) up close; it also serves as a sneak peek at her next film, which she'll begin as soon as she finishes promoting her short-story collection, *No One Belongs Here More Than You*, which will be released in May. "I had to trick myself into writing my next movie," she says, laughing. "I was like, I'll do this performance, and then finally I was just like, Gosh, wouldn't it be nice to have some other actors?"

July grew up in Berkeley, California, where she blazed a fiercely independent artistic path. She wrote and presented her first professional play at a punk club when she was just 16: *The Lifers*, based on a

correspondence she started with a man in prison. "The fact that I chose to do that in a punk club outside of my school, or outside of any theater context, set my course for basically doing everything myself," she says. "I just wanted to do real things. I thought, Even if it's just folding chairs in a music space covered with graffiti, at least

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it's real and it has some sort of dignity to it."

She has since relocated to Los Angeles—partly because her boyfriend, filmmaker Mike Mills, lives there—but not much about her artistic sensibility has changed since her Portland days. "I think I have more confidence," July says. "But I've really had to assert that Portland do-it-yourself way. That means I don't read other people's scripts, because I'm not going to devote three years to making something that doesn't come from me. A lot of it is really counter to the system here."

July has even done the unthinkable: put an end to "taking meetings" with Hollywood power types. "It's not like I'm made out of steel," she says. "All of those things are really distracting. I've figured out that the way I've been doing things works really well. It's my way, and I'm kind of protecting it. It's just the same as sitting down and being like, What do I feel right now? And trying to have some faith in that and to let it come out in whatever strange way it will."

Miranda July is at the Kitchen Mar 1-4. Visit her participatory website at learningtoloveyoumore.com.

