



Theater

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# Gently Abandoning the Theater: Martina Potratz

by Adam R. Burnett

Downtown theater has experienced a diaspora in the past decade, sending companies and venues further out in the boroughs, to neighborhoods that once would have never been considered as viable. With real estate exponentially mushrooming to perilous heights, and box-office splits an arrangement of the past, self-producing artists aren't able to afford the rent of even the most modest of black boxes. The city many of us moved to over a decade ago is no longer viable (or was it ever?) to create and produce our work. One solution would be to leave the city altogether, but playwright/producer/performer Martina Potratz has leaned into another solution: leave the theater.

From June 14 -17, Potratz's new play *In the Blue Hour* will be presented at La Maison d'Art, a gallery/Airbnb space in Harlem that Potratz and director Melissa Crespo will transform to hold an intimate dinner party for a baker's dozen participants. Influenced by the playwright's previous undertakings, the presentation will be immersive and untethered from the physical theater.

"The only way I was able to afford to do something was to do it in my own home," she says about her first piece, *A Sitcom for the Apocalypse*, which was produced in her apartment in October 2012. But for this piece Potratz wanted to leave her own abode and put the ask out to her community for a space fit for a dinner party. Although avoiding the pitfalls of seeking a traditional theater venue, space in New York is still at a premium—whether you're in a theater, a warehouse, or a living room—and capitalist values nestle their way in somehow.

While location scouting at a warehouse space in Brooklyn, Potratz inquired whether she could minimize the scale of the space, using only a small portion so as to maximize the intimacy. The owner of the space immediately tried to retool her entire vision in the midst of a real estate exchange. "Without knowing anything about the play he was telling me how to make the play bigger," Potratz tells me. "Then he was like, As a female producer you should really start thinking bigger. And I was like, You don't know my play! I walked out of there."

"And it always seems to come up—it's always about making more money and not what the play needs," continues Potratz. "People say, This is a great idea, but how many people can see it? And I'm like, Oh, ten to fifteen people per night. And people say, That's a ridiculous idea. Why would you only make a play for so few people? But the thing is, that's the play. I can't make a play for forty people where they still have an intimate experience. I can't write that play."

Ultimately, Potratz found a space in Harlem with dual identities—a part-time gallery and a part-time Airbnb, a reflection of art practices in the city itself: if you're going to pursue the craft, you must hustle in multiple directions simultaneously. “[The owner] invited us into the space because it was her excitement around the project, that it fit,” Potratz says about the venue.

Equally inspired by Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and a fiftieth birthday party her mother threw for herself before passing, Potratz is concerned with the social and intimate space surrounding invitation and community. The efforts of Potratz's production seem to come less as a result of having answers but of a desire toward crafting questions around space, spectatorship, and memory.

“My mother passed away from cancer in her mid-fifties,” Potratz explains, “And, you know, she was a single mom—working, taking care of us—but when she turned fifty she threw this huge birthday party. And all of a sudden, on her fiftieth birthday, she was this social butterfly—this person that everyone wanted to be around. And I didn't know my mother that way. I think back to that, and it's kind of amazing to throw yourself a party like that.”

*In the Blue Hour* intends to invite audiences into a space where their stories and histories are inseparable from the experience of the play, which floats across the landscapes of an ailing woman's memory. After purchasing tickets, audience members will be sent a brief questionnaire to fill out—with questions ranging from food preferences, to relationship status, to childhood memories. The answers to these questions will allow the ensemble to “gently embed” the audience into the narrative and the memoryscape of the character.

And this phrase—gently embed—is most intentional in Potratz's vision of the experience.

“Martina calls it audience embedding,” says director Melissa Crespo, who has been working on the piece for two years with Potratz. “Smoothly and seamlessly bringing the audience into the work, where audience members are not put on the spot. This is a very gentle interaction.”

In the notes before the script, Potratz has written the following suggestions:

To achieve a high level of intimacy and embed the audience in the world of the play, they need to be treated as guests and friends rather than audience members.

In the invitation, encourage the audience to bring some of Vanessa's favorite flowers to the party. No pressure, only if they feel like it.

Mistakes will happen, some people will not react or show up at all, some will do too much.

The expectation throughout Potratz's text is colored with the option of “or not”: you are here, there is room for you, you will be seen, you can participate...or not. When immersive theater has been capitalized beyond *Sleep No More* to triple-digit priced tickets for escape room experiences, *In The Blue Hour* is a thoughtful reconsideration of the theater's role in taking care of the spectator. This is not about adrenaline rush or unwarranted interactions of spectacle; it is a mindful exchange in consent, care, and recognition.

Potratz's act of production is an unobtrusive response to space and capital, with the determination to create a work and share an experience without a financial or emotional deficit, for both producer and spectator.

Potratz's care emanates from the shared concerns of her protagonist—Vanessa, a woman who desperately holds on to the past while struggling with the ongoing present tense of hosting a dinner party that may very well be her last. The ghost that lurks at the edges of Vanessa's story is the universal—providing the opportunity for audiences to share their own space, to find reconciliation and forgiveness in the act of a shared performance.

“[The play] explores what it means to pass from one dimension to another,” director Crespo says. “Whatever that means to you. It's important that the audience is a part of that journey, because we don't often get to be with family members in their private journey with health issues. This play provides a window into that experience.”

In reading Potratz's text, a collection of lines stood out that both hearken Mrs. Dalloway and the universal experience of loss in love:

. . . it occurred to you that you can only truly love someone when it's all over.

Because there are no more needs.

No more demands.

This encapsulation feels appropriate for Potratz's aspiration of grace and gentleness with the audience. What the playwright/producer and director are constructing may be what we so rarely encounter these days—the beauty of simplicity, the intention of asking small questions that radiate in the mild effervescent space of what we carry after the event is over, when our spectatorship ends.

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In *The Blue Hour*, written by **Martina Potratz**, directed by **Melissa Crespo** and featuring **Kathryn Rossetter**, runs from **June 14-17** at **La Maison d'Art (259W 132nd Street, New York, NY 10027)**. Tickets available at: [www.artful.ly/store/events/15289](http://www.artful.ly/store/events/15289)

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