

Available Light Opens Their Season Strong With Bootleg Radio



David Glover in Available Light's "Bootleg Radio." Photo by Matt Slaybaugh.



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Available Light has built their reputation for more than a decade on audacious, risk-taking work that defies expectation and categorization. That spirit burns in their 2017-18 opener *Bootleg Radio*, written and directed by Jennifer Schlueter and Matt Slaybaugh. I saw *Bootleg Radio* this weekend and images, feelings, and lines still rattle around in my head. It runs for two more performances.

At its heart, *Bootleg Radio* centers on an inversion of Sartre's famous "Hell is other people" reconfigured into "Maybe hope is other people." More importantly, one of the nine-person ensemble says that line not as a declamation but like they've just discovered it and moved on. The line appears like a gorgeous, glittering gem bobbing on a river, coming into view then further down. That sense of motion and fluidity cries out to be embraced here. Everything is reminiscent of a radio in its panoramic scope – the world is coming through those speakers – and its intimacy: this person is whispering in my ear.



*(l to r) Todd Eckert, David J. Glover, and Acacia L. Duncan in Available Light's "Bootleg Radio."
Photo by Matt Slaybaugh.*

The ensemble of Acacia Duncan, Todd Eckert, David Glover, Brian Gray, Amanda Loch, Gina Hoch-Stall (Karie Miller in the weekends I didn't see), Elena Perantoni, Ian Short, and Dakota Thorn, don't play discrete characters. Schlueter and Slaybaugh's writing and direction for these characters call to mind Duke Ellington and Charles Mingus as much as other theatre work. The structure they've built is solid enough for the ideas and themes – and audience perceptions – to bounce off it and retain its shape and it always feels as though they're writing for these players, these unique voices.

Bootleg Radio breathes; Schlueter and Slaybaugh are confident enough in what they're doing to not race or ram ideas into us. It pauses long enough to let the audience marvel at a solo – Perantoni's dazzling monologue of naming each item that comes out of a suitcase but not with the name the physical object would have if we saw it in the store is a particular stand-out – but trying to reset or be ready for every new sensation or reference just leads to frustration and missing more than you would otherwise.



(l to r) Elena Perantoni, Amanda Loch, and David Glover in Available Light's "Bootleg Radio." Photo by Matt Slaybaugh.

Mood is the primary color this production paints with and a sense of relaxed attentiveness is key to getting the most pleasure out of *Bootleg Radio*. In the opening moments, Amanda Loch's character calls a radio station – or dial-a-prayer or someone she barely knows, just looking for a connection – to bemoan she's up at 3 a.m. and desperate to know "if love and fury can co-exist." Brian Gray's smooth, soft voice flows from across the stage: "I don't know the answer to that. But I'm up at 3 a.m. too." That sense of being beholden to each other sang right down my spine and I got that charge again and again. Slaybaugh's evocative original music, Dave Wallingford's sound design, and John Dranschak's lighting shade and bolster that sense of mood.

Allusion and quotation stud and marble the script here, the program lists over 20 artists whose work it draws from along with material from every member of the company and 20+ artists in town. Words as famous as Adam Zagajewski's (translated by Clare Cavanagh) "Try to bless the mutilated world" and Langston Hughes' "I am so tired of waiting, / Aren't you, / For the world to become good / And beautiful and kind?" repeat, shifted, along with lesser-known snatches of writers like Italo Calvino and Adrienne Rich (her "The rules break like a thermometer" appears twice like the water of life).

There's so much of the history of our shared literature and culture here that trying to catch everything could turn this into a frustrating game of *Where's Waldo*, as immaterial as trying to read the headlines on a Rauschenberg combine. The audience needs to feel what resonates and embrace the piece of work in front of them. It plays with this in moments where the cast comes into the audience and whispers something to different sections and most directly when the set divides into quadrants leading the audience to lean in, worried they're missing out on an experience the next section of chairs has but creating the need to sit back and appreciate what's happening right in front of them.

Schlueter and Slaybaugh also understand the limits of speech. For all the moving talk here from some of our finest actors, many of my favorite moments came when one or more people would dance to Eckert's lovely, earthy choreography. The entire company moving up and down the stage, dotted with someone stopping to speak could have been a *Laugh-In* interstitial but ends up as something gorgeous.



Even when it does and not be smart that even Eckert's charming delivery can't make into something other than obvious underlining. Seeding the already cramped seats with props and later handing those props to other audience members just seems like a forced effort to pump some interactivity into the room. But that handful of tonal missteps come and go in the wash of beauty.

Someone who needs characters and a more direct through-line will find Bootleg Radio frustrating. But it's one of the most invigorating things of any stripe I've seen on a stage all year. Bootleg Radio embodies the sense of empathy and understanding inherent in live performance and brings those qualities to the fore with wit, humanity, and love.

Bootleg Radio runs through October 14 with performances on Thursday and Saturday at 8:00 p.m. For tickets and more info, visit avltheatre.com.

