

The Torontoist Review by Johnnie Walker, Arts & Events (July 11, 2007)

The Gladstone Variations is taking the Fringe by storm. And with good reason. The 90-minute piece is by Convergence Theatre, who were the team behind last year's fantastic *AutoShow*, which was actually a collection of 7 ten-minute plays by different playwrights performed in and around the parking lot at Royal St. George's. *The Gladstone Variations* is actually more ambitious and, amazingly, even more successful. The piece is made up of four short plays by different writers and, as the title would suggest, takes place entirely in and around the historic Gladstone Hotel. The 60 audience members are broken into groups of 15 and each is made to follow the actors of one of the plays around the hotel while they perform their show. Each group sees two of the four plays in one performance, constituting one "variation." And that's the brilliant marketing strategy of the show: to be able to see the entire thing, you have to go to it twice.

Variation One consists of "The Tearful Bride" and "Requiem For a Hotel." "Bride" is a curiously-told, ghostly little tale about a concierge who falls off the top of the hotel. Or is it about a bellhop who falls in love with a bride staying at the hotel? Richard Greenblatt (of *2 Pianos, 4 Hands* fame) is great as the fast-talking Concierge narrator, and Marc Bendavid provides a passionate turn as the Bellhop. "Requiem" is a very different piece about a crazy old karaoke broad named Rhonda who unknowingly becomes a source of entertainment for two young men who want to make a Youtube video out of her. Janet Amos turns in a very entertaining performance as Rhonda, and Aviva Armour-Ostroff is excellent as event co-ordinator Jenny.

Teasingly, the plays from the other variation briefly cross over with the plays from this one, giving you a taste of what will happen in the other half of the piece. This Torontoist for one will certainly be returning to *The Gladstone Variations* to find out what the rest of the show is about.

A funny thing happened near the end of the short play "The Card Trick" last afternoon in the second variation of *The Gladstone Variations*. The action moved outside to the alley behind the hotel and the audience was told to stand in a driveway next to the hotel's back entrance to watch the action unfold. Unfortunately, there was a humongous Jeep parked in the driveway; the kind where the alarm goes off not because you have touched it, but because you were standing rather too close to its personal space.

In a show like *The Gladstone Variations*, it can be hard at times to tell who are actors and who are just passersby. But it became clear very soon that the angry man who emerged from the back of the building next door screaming at the audience to "get off my f--king property!" was no theatrical illusion. The actors tried valiantly to continue the performance, while a host of stage managers and audience wranglers attempted to placate the incensed/insane man who refused to turn off his Jeep's car alarm. Audience members stuck together and got as radical as Torontonians theatregoers are likely to get—instead of yelling "f--k off and die!" in response, they stuck to "why don't you enroll in some anger management sessions and allow us to watch the play?"

Although the ending of that show was moderately ruined by the screaming person, it did little to quash the audience's high spirits and appreciation for the fantastic show. There was a wonderful round of vindicated laughter when an actor whose character exists both within "The Card Trick" and the other part of the second variation, "I Grow Old," ad-libbed a line about "a--holes with car alarms who think they own the world." The second variation is equally as compelling and exciting as the first, and you cannot truly get the full experience of the show without having seen both, although the order is not particularly important. Pieces of information that seem confusing or unexplained in one become absolutely essential to the understanding of the others. Spending two nights or a night and an afternoon chasing actors throughout the historic hotel and seeking out stories is a thrilling theatrical experience, and one worth fighting for. As much as Torontonians theatregoers are willing to fight for anything.