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Studio 180 Theatre presents the North American Premiere of

NSFW (*Not Safe For Work*)

By Lucy Kirkwood • Directed by Joel Greenberg

A Satire About Money, Sex and Photoshop

November 7 to 30, 2014

The Theatre Centre 1115 Queen Street West, Toronto

Studio 180 Theatre is delighted to present the work of multi award-winning British playwright **Lucy Kirkwood** for the first time in North America. ***NSFW***, Kirkwood's acclaimed play from 2012, will be directed by **Joel Greenberg** and will be performed November 7 to 30, 2014 at The Theatre Centre.

NSFW, which in this age of easy text-ready acronyms means, "Not Safe for Work", pulls back the curtain on digital media and magazine culture. It's a world where jobs are scarce, beauty standards are punishing and personal integrity is a luxury that few can afford.

For the folks at "Doghouse" (a tawdry men's rag that traffics in titillation) and "Electra" (an elegant women's publication), relationships, legal liability and self-worth are all at stake. Everyone strives for professional success and financial stability – but at what cost? Who will hold tight to their values? Who will sell out to the highest bidder? And just how old is that girl in the photo?

Critical Acclaim for the Royal Court production of *NSFW*:

"Kirkwood hits several nails squarely on the head... the hypocrisy of the male mags that pretend they're providing a public service, the snarkiness of tone that pervades even upmarket journalism and, above all, the economic desperation that drives intelligent people to sacrifice their principles." *THE GUARDIAN*

"A savvy and deeply uncomfortable look at the world of modern media. It's a timely, provocative response to the way women are presented in magazines – studded with moments of outrageous humour." ★★★ *EVENING STANDARD*

"A black satire about power and privacy in the cut-throat era of Photoshop, internet exhibitionism and high graduate unemployment." ★★★ *INDEPENDENT*

“A cracking piece, sharp, funny, and timely. Richly absorbing and inventive.”★★★★ THE TELEGRAPH

“Kirkwood retain[s] a note of empathy for even her worst characters. [They] may be awful, but we can see how the world made them this way – they aren’t responsible for society’s perception of women, they reflect it... Extremely funny.”★★★★ TIME OUT

The North American Premiere Production:

DIRECTED BY Joel Greenberg

FEATURING Ian D. Clark, Susan Coyne, Patrick Galligan, James Graham, Jessica Greenberg, Aaron Stern

SET & COSTUME DESIGN Denyse Karn

LIGHTING DESIGN Kimberly Purtell

SOUND DESIGN Verne Good

HEAD OF PROPERTIES Vanessa Janiszewski

STAGE MANAGER Andrea Schurman

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGER Laura Baxter

About the Playwright

Just turned 30, **Lucy Kirkwood** is widely considered one of the finest young playwrights working in the English language today.

Kirkwood began her playwriting career in 2007 when, upon graduating with a degree in English Literature from the University of Edinburgh, she wrote her first full-length stage play, *Grady Hot Potato*. Her next play, *Guns or Butter*, was produced at the Terror 2007 Festival at the Union Theatre, London, and was subsequently broadcast by BBC Radio. In 2008, *Tinderbox* was produced by the Bush Theatre, and in the same year *Hedda*, her adaptation of Ibsen’s *Hedda Gabler*, was produced by the Gate Theatre, London, to wide critical acclaim.

Psychogeography was produced as part of the Terror 2009 Festival. In the same year, Kirkwood’s play *it felt empty when the heart went at first but it is alright now* was produced by Clean Break Theatre Co. at the Arcola Theatre. The play, which received stunning reviews, was nominated for an Evening Standard Award – Best Newcomer, and made Lucy joint winner of the John Whiting Award in 2010.

Kirkwood’s stage adaptation of *Beauty and the Beast*, co-devised and directed by Katie Mitchell, was performed at the National Theatre as its Christmas show in 2011. In the same year, her play *The Small Hours* (co-written with Ed Hime) opened at the Hampstead earlier, and her play *Housekeeping* was performed as part of Theatre Uncut season at Southwark Playhouse.

NSFW premiered at the Royal Court Theatre in 2012. Her recent success, *Chimerica*, premiered at the Almeida Theatre in 2013 and subsequently transferred to the West End, earning Lucy the prestigious Olivier and Evening Standard Best New Play awards.

Earlier this year, Lucy collaborated with Lost Dog on a Brighton Festival co-commissioned dance project, *Like Rabbits*, adapted from Virginia Woolf's short story *Lappin and Lapinova*. Lucy also writes for television, and has written for *Skins* (Company Pictures) and more recently created and wrote the new series *The Smoke* (Kudos/Sky 1).

She is currently under commission to the Royal Court Theatre, the National Theatre and Manhattan Theatre Club in New York.

She is also developing a new screenplay for Film4/Ruby Films.

Studio 180 Theatre presents

NSFW

By Lucy Kirkwood • Directed by Joel Greenberg

November 7-30, 2014

Tuesday–Saturday at 8PM

Wednesday matinees Nov. 12, 19 and 26 at 1:30PM

Saturday* and Sunday matinees at 2PM

*No 2PM show on Saturday, Nov. 8

Tickets: \$39 regular • \$15 on Tuesdays

The Theatre Centre, 1115 Queen St. West

Tickets available by phone 416-907-0468

Online www.studio180theatre.com

Interview with the Playwright Lucy Kirkwood:

“Boys are force-fed this very plastic sexuality on a mass scale”

By TIM ADAMS

Published October 21, 2012 *The Observer*

NSFW, Lucy Kirkwood’s new play, focuses on the relationship between the media and sexuality. She talks about the exposure of teenage boys to pornography, and about dealing with criticism.

In researching her new play, a comedy partly set in the offices of a *Nuts!*-style men’s magazine called “Doghouse,” Lucy Kirkwood felt herself channelling the spirit of Mary Whitehouse only once. *NSFW* takes its title from the directive on certain web pages – “not safe for work” – which acts as a warning about content you wouldn’t necessarily want your boss to see you browsing. Among those NSFW-rated pages that Kirkwood discovered was a site called Rate my Rack.

“Of all the fairly grim things I looked at, that was the one that probably disturbed me most,” she says, in a lunchtime break from watching rehearsals at the Royal Court in London where *NSFW* opens this week.

“Rate my Rack is this place where hundreds of girls and women send their picture in – no head, just their boobs – inviting people to log on and rate the picture out of 10 and add some comments. It was not really the men looking and rating that is sad so much as all these women thinking, ‘I need this affirmation.’ Cutting their own heads off, as it were. I mean, you have to live in the culture you are in. But I found that quite depressing.”

NSFW dwells candidly on some of the implications of that culture, finding unsettling and often sharply funny satire in the ways in which magazines – and their readers – routinely objectify sexuality and the female body. Kirkwood does not restrict her attention to the laddish *Loaded* leer. The second half of *NSFW* takes place in a glossy women’s magazine called “Electra” and has merciless fun with a female editor in her late 40s who forces a prospective editorial assistant, a sensitive young man who needs the job, cruelly to find flaws in the perfect celebrity bodies that will grace her pages.

“In different ways, both men and women betray women,” Kirkwood says. In examining these issues, and without wanting to “dramatise a *Guardian* editorial,” she nevertheless deftly locates the pressure points of our current discomfort over privacy and sexuality, innocence and prurience, and the ways in which those boundaries are made porous by media in obsessive search of market share.

After a run of very different stories that have produced collective unease and shock – from voyeurism and the Duchess of Cambridge, through the appalling details of grooming and rape in Rochdale to the ongoing Jimmy Savile revelations – the play feels very much of its moment. Kirkwood suggests this is inevitability rather than serendipity.

“People keep saying to me, ‘Isn’t it good timing?’” she says. “But we are always talking about these things, aren’t we? The play wouldn’t have been written if we didn’t live in a culture where those anxieties didn’t have a natural end point. The word ‘climate’ comes up in the play a lot and the question of how that vague idea creates the boundaries for these kinds of issues and how we discuss them.”

I have only read *NSFW*, but Kirkwood’s writing is pitch-perfect on the page. She spent some time in the kinds of places that these issues find their home, talking to magazine editors, visiting the offices of *Tatler*, among other places (though she is anxious to stress that was not the model for *Electra*), and she has a precise ear for editorial banter of compromise and self-deception. She tells me her writing heroes are Arthur Miller and Edward Albee and this play begins to demonstrate a hint of that kind of mimetic care.

It is also, in that tradition, much concerned with work, what we will do to pay the bills. Kirkwood is astute about the current desperation to find a foothold in “the creative industries” and the exploitation that results.

“I find that fascinating, the disconnect between the people who create these magazines and the people who read them,” she says. “I mean, all these overqualified English graduates with their literary references writing captions for models. You can’t blame them, because most of them seem to have worked for nothing for three years. My sister works in that kind of world and she is brilliant and has a CV 20 pages long and 18 pages of that are unpaid internships.”

Kirkwood’s own CV has been a varied one, so far, taking in an acclaimed updating of *Hedda Gabler*, set in Notting Hill; the dystopian extremes of *Tinderbox*, which, at the height of the financial crash, pictured a Britain of the near future unhinged by riots and cannibalism, and managed to find some bleak comedy in the fallout; and the affecting first-person of *It Felt Empty When the Heart Went at First But it is Alright Now*, based on the stories of victims of sex- trafficking locked up in detention centres such as Yarl’s Wood. It is not a straightforward trajectory, though if you were looking for a consistent theme she suggests that: “A lot of my work dwells on this idea of people buying and selling things that maybe shouldn’t be bought or sold. Things that are private, personal.” And of course, to some extent, we are all guilty.

The relatively trivial example of the Duchess of Cambridge’s topless sunbathing is nevertheless relevant in this context, she believes: “It’s the attitude of, ‘That’s disgusting... let me see them’ that runs through a lot of this,” she suggests. “And it was, you know, middle-aged women who wanted to look as much as young men.”

Kirkwood hesitates before describing herself as a political writer, though you might group her with her contemporaries Lucy Prebble and Polly Stenham in taking on subjects that demand ethical judgments, albeit complex ones.

“I think people are very afraid of appearing coy or moralising,” she says. “No one wants to look prudish and so there almost seems to be an embargo on even discussing any of these issues. There is a new campaign to ban Page 3. I mean, that last one was [led by] Clare Short and we all remember how that turned out.”

In 2010, Kirkwood wrote a short play for the Tricycle theatre about the Greenham Common women and researching that generation's protests seemed an invitation to think hard about what feminism might mean now. In discussing this play, she references Natasha Walter's book *Living Dolls*, saying she "particularly liked Walter's equivocation on things. As a modern feminist, you almost have to keep stating that there is nothing wrong with enjoying clothes or make-up until it becomes a fascism, all of that."

Kirkwood, who has recently moved from a shared house in Shoreditch, east London, to live with her partner near Diss on the border of Suffolk and Norfolk, seems something of an equivocation of forces in person, too. She is an orderly seeming presence, with what sound like obsessive workaholic tendencies ("I often finish one project and I am halfway through a bottle of wine and I just think: carry on").

The girlishness of manner belies the kind of journalistic determination that allowed her to get her *Yarl's Wood* drama on stage. She flinches a bit when I describe her work as rooted in anger, thinking of it as something lighter, less earnest, though concedes that she sometimes feels she has no choice but to give certain stories a voice.

One of the difficulties of being engaged with politics in this post-Blair era, she says, is that "it is hard to tell who the good guys are." She went on the anti-cuts march, but most of her friends not only didn't go, she suggests, they weren't even aware it was happening.

Having grown up in Wanstead in east London, the elder daughter of a City analyst father and sign-language teaching mother, she didn't really start thinking about either writing or politics until she went to university in Edinburgh. The first student play she wrote fell into the hands of an agent and commissions from the Bush theatre and the National studio quickly followed.

Hedda did very well, but the apparent shock tactics of *Tinderbox* were savaged by certain critics. Charles Spencer in the *Telegraph* was particularly vicious, calling Kirkwood's debut a "festering mixture of irritation and boredom" and a "clapped-out comedy fit for the knacker's yard."

I assume it is Spencer's harsh judgment that she is referring to when she says: "There is one review of *Tinderbox* that still makes me very upset and if I wasn't such a stubborn old cow I may have just given up and stopped writing at that point. I just felt this terrible vitriol behind the words. I was so young and it was awful. I think it must be how people feel when they get to Oxford and they realise everyone is much cleverer than they are. Suddenly you are faced with this panic and doubt."

One response to that doubt for Kirkwood was to go and work with theatre company Clean Break to put the story of sex trafficking on stage. It was, necessarily, a grounding experience, she says. "The work we did makes you feel, you know, that an artistic life is an incredibly privileged thing. It helped me put a few bad reviews in perspective. The stakes in this are not so high.

I don't have children that I can't feed."

After that, Kirkwood has hardly paused for breath, apparently. Among the projects she is currently engaged with, apart from the Royal Court play, are a reimagining of Hansel and Gretel for the National, a drama series for Sky One about firemen (“I like to think of it as London’s Not Burning”) and a three-part series for Channel 4 about pornography, which is a reported offshoot of the preoccupations of *NSFW*.

The more she has researched, the more disturbed she has become. “We are all sort of pretending it is not happening. I think 12 is the average age for boys to see their first pornography these days, but that doesn’t mean picking up a copy of *Razzle* from a railway siding; it is like some woman having an object shoved into her anus on a sort of high-definition film. I have a friend who is a teacher who had to leave her job because a 15-year-old boy stuck a camera up her skirt and put it online.

“Boys are being force-fed this very plastic sexuality on a mass scale. It is not something they have found for themselves in a way. There is no discovery. The Internet says, you know, ‘The rest of your life you will find enormous boobs out there.’ The question is how do you kind of reboot from that position?”

Her play aims to highlight some of the implications of that question, without attempting conclusions. “I don’t think the play offers any solutions,” she says. “It tries to suggest love as a thing to cling to when everything else is being eroded. But of course I don’t have any answers; none of us does.”

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