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## THEATER REVIEW; He's Famous (Briefly), Therefore He Is (Briefly)

By **BRUCE WEBER**

Don DeLillo, a first-rank novelist, isn't a natural playwright. He has a predilection for brusque, lancing observations delivered like literate jabs, with a strident, declarative torque. But the writing isn't spare. In all his work Mr. DeLillo effuses; the momentum of his sentences carries past the periods and his paragraphs seem to roll downhill, throwing off blunt metaphors like sparks.

"Valparaiso," Mr. DeLillo's dire, intellectual comedy about a world in which media exposure is the only measure of a man, is a case in point. First produced in 1999, the language is too carefully molded, too loaded, too calculatedly oblique to serve characters in conversation. The writing is indisputably electric, but it is of the sort that is better suited to narration than dialogue. And the play, which has been produced at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Mass., and at Steppenwolf in Chicago (where I saw it two years ago) has tended to baffle audiences with its cryptic classical allusions (the show includes a Greekish chorus made up of flight attendants) and elliptical, if eloquent, speechifying.

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Now, however, a revelatory new production at the Blue Heron Theater by a four-year-old troupe, the Rude Mechanicals Theater Company, has brought Mr. DeLillo's shrewd, despairing humor into focus. It's true that a few elements of the play feel a bit stale; the talk show host is, after all, a well-thrashed target of parody, and for a play about the shrinking globe and dehumanizing factors in contemporary life it seems an oversight not to at least acknowledge the Internet.

But Mr. DeLillo has given his blessing to this production, and it's no wonder; under the direction of Hal Brooks, "Valparaiso" as a whole seems suddenly fresh and pertinent. It is drawing a hip, downtown crowd and may well extend beyond its announced closing date of Monday.

This success is largely due to terrific work by the ensemble of actors, virtually all of whom have parsed Mr. DeLillo's esoteric language with genuine imagination. On a set by David Korins that spots red-orange accessories like strident inkblots in a generic, ash-white living room, they succeed in creating actual characters (or parodies of characters) from the intellectual conceits that exist on the page.

The title refers to the cities in Indiana, Florida and Chile. It was the fate of the lead character, Michael Majeski, to start off on a business trip to the first one, and through a series of mistakes by the airlines and poor decisions of his own, to end up instead in the other two.

By the time the play begins, Michael (Matthew Lawler) is ascending to international notoriety, his cute little adventure being told in newspapers and magazines, on radio and television around the clock. And as the story chases itself from media outlet to media outlet, it is elevated into a symbol of a shrinking world, a world in which one place is undifferentiable from another. In the world of the play, people become important -- or maybe more troubling, become recognizably alive -- only when they are exposed to public scrutiny.

It is Mr. DeLillo's clear contention that the power of media to impinge on individual lives is insidious and unhealthy, and it is persuasive in its hyperbole; the second act, which takes place entirely on the set of an "Oprah"-like television show, brings Michael's fate to its surreal and fittingly tragic end.

By this point any parody of talk television feels a little worn, so a shadow of tiredness hangs over the play after intermission. But even so, the host, Delfina Treadwell, is played by Carla Harting with a sure and self-skewering delight in her own importance. In spike heels, a sexy black dress, perfect hair and a pretty smile that is spread on her face as if part of her makeup, Ms. Harting, a Kelly Ripa look-alike, becomes eerily monstrous as she proceeds, in her interview with Michael and his pregnant wife, Livia (Elizabeth Sherman), from sympathetic questioner to accusing interrogator to seductive confessor to righteous executioner.

It is in the first act, however, that the show is at its most feverishly funny. It consists of Michael, occasionally with Livia, granting a series of interviews for different media, and Mr. Lawler is delightful in his skilled, understated rendering of an ordinary schmo who recognizes an opportunity for celebrity and goes about learning how the game is played. As the interviews lead him more deeply into the details of his personal life and even his emotional secrets, he becomes unwittingly turned inside out. A soliloquy just before intermission, in which he responds to a radio interviewer as though he were on a psychiatrist's couch, is icily hilarious.

Mr. Lawler is helped immeasurably by Ms. Sherman, who plays Livia as a wife who refuses to be left behind by her husband's rising star, and by Andrew Benator and Kate Nowlin, who play a variety of interviewers. Ms. Nowlin shines particularly as a young reporter for a tabloid who has "come into a stranger's home to do the most superficial sort of dimwit interview"; in the course of the interview she succumbs to the confusion of its artificiality, betraying her girlishness, sexual alertness and insecurity. Mr. Benator gives the show its biggest laughs with a riotous and original take on the stereotype of the pretentious documentary filmmaker.

Together they teach Michael that as a subject for scrutiny, his whole life is fair game. "The interview was under way when I pulled into your driveway," one of Mr. Benator's characters explains. "It was under way when I put the key in the ignition in my own driveway. It was under way when you got on the wrong plane and went to the wrong place. The interview started before that. How far back do you want to go?"

Overall their withering portrayals add up to a brutally scornful view of the media. Among other things in this intelligent production, it makes a theater critic consider anew the role of his opinions.

## VALPARAISO

By Don DeLillo; directed by Hal Brooks; sets by David Korins; lighting by Mark Barton; music composed by Mike Errico; video design by Daniel Carey; choreography by Malene Schjonnin; production manager/technical director, Jon Krupp; stage management, Erica Villalba and Irene Williams. Presented by Rude Mechanicals Theater Company, Matt Lawler, executive director; Eric Siegel, artistic director; Derek Cecil, associate artistic director. At the Blue Heron Arts Center, 123 East 24th Street, Manhattan.

WITH: Matthew Lawler (Michael), Elizabeth Sherman (Livia), Kate Nowlin (Female Interviewer/Chorus), Andrew Benator (Male Interviewer/Chorus), David Fitzgerald (Teddy), Carla Harting (Delfina) and Julie Fitzpatrick (Chorus).

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