

Over and Over

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Habit, written and directed by David Levine. Luminato Festival, Toronto, June 10–19, 2011.

THE PLAY is looped. There are no stage directions, but the script itself must be strictly observed, and the actors can't leave the set. Each performance lasts eight hours, from eleven in the morning until seven at night. The actors move about the entire first floor of a small house rigged up in an airy gallery; the audience members come and go as they please, observing the action through the open windows, milling around behind exposed sheetrock, wiring, plumbing. It's a little like the way Perec described his *Life: A User's Manual*: as if the façade of an apartment block had been removed.

The first time you watch it, even if you know the conceit, you're just watching a play, sort of a not great play, a little lurid and more than a little melodramatic, but at least the staging is unusual. You're not sitting in a dark theater, for one thing, and it's a licentious diversion to scoot around with a like-minded crowd of excitable voyeurs. At the beginning, Doug and Mitch and Viv wake up to a house laid to waste—maybe Mitch is on the couch, or Doug and Viv are in the bedroom, or all three of them are splayed at the end of the corridor—after what's clearly been a historic bender. It might be one P.M., but it might be seven P.M. All of the clocks in the house show different times. Doug deals coke; Mitch, his little brother, has just been laid off from Wal-Mart, but fancies himself a poet and musician. Viv is a friend from high school, back home on a visit to their rusted-over, used-up town on a college break. It's important that Mitch, Doug, and Viv are stock characters, because it makes them both legible and plastic.

Doug and Viv, we learn, have had sex at some point mid-bender. By the end of the play, Viv has learned that Doug and Mitch—or maybe just Mitch—were partly responsible for the death of Viv's brother Petey. We've also learned that Viv, a stripper and an intellectual fond of quoting *The Genealogy of Morals* and making stoner-Barthesian arguments about the semiotics of Halloween masks, is home not to visit but to kill herself. Due to academic indolence and sexual indiscretion—both bred of class resentment—she's lost her college scholarship and has been expelled. We've also learned that Doug is having a hard time getting the cash he owes his distributor. This is especially problematic after Viv flushes the remainder of his coke down the toilet, which is the kind of detail you happen to see if you've been following Viv around, or if you're accidentally near the bathroom when

she does it. If, however, you're watching Mitch and Doug argue in the living room, you miss it—just as, if you haven't watched her alone at earlier points in the play, you probably haven't noticed just how desperate she is. Not that it really matters; you figure it out soon enough. When she comes back to join them in the living room, the gun she's found earlier—which you do or don't know about—is hidden in her dress. You might have seen her put it there.

The script's last line is "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry." Mitch says it, to Viv. On my first loop, Mitch delivered the line right before he shot her, at her behest. Then Mitch and Doug slumped, devastated, against the corridor walls a few feet from her corpse, until they'd allowed enough time for death to become sleep (you could always see this first in Viv, as she deepened her breath and then shifted in a dream) and night to become morning, and then they were stirring, one by one, from their historic bender, and, finally, a few minutes later, delivering the play's first lines. On my second loop, Mitch delivered the final lines to Viv just after she'd been shot by Doug, and right before Doug shot himself. That was in the bathroom, and from my vantage point outside the bedroom window I could see the second shot but not the first. Mitch staggered to the couch with the gun to his head, but he couldn't pull the trigger, and a few minutes later he woke up hungover on the couch. On my third loop, some five hours into the day, Mitch uttered his final apology after he had to shoot Doug, who was strangling Viv on the kitchen floor. The three woke up in a pile.

THE FIRST loop is fun to watch but the second loop is when you start to get it. It's twelve forty-five now—in the world of the audience and the actors, even if it's once again a bleary three or seven P.M. in the world of the characters—and the actors are hungry. Viv takes some pasta from a pot on the stove; Doug had made it, and set it aside, just before Mitch killed her the previous evening. I think to myself, That's day-old pasta! Don't eat that! But then I remember it's actually only been sitting there for fifteen minutes. Mitch heats up some pasta sauce and cuts up a block of cheddar. Viv plates the pasta for the three of them, and they come together at the table to make fun of Mitch's nerdy knowledge of obscure Seventies rock compilations. The first time I watched them have this conversation, some two hours earlier, Mitch was on the couch, so hungover he could barely talk; Viv, in a foul mood, was blowing up orange balloons at the table; and Doug was walking around getting dressed after his first shower of the day. This time, however,

they're sharing a meal, and the atmosphere is familial and pleasant. This early scene seems to set the tenor for the whole iteration: they're kinder to each other than they were the first run-through, and it's hard not to credit this initial shared meal.

The actors in *Habit* have to work within overlapping structures of necessity. One of them is the text. Another is their character; they have to have habituated themselves to the sorts of ways their characters might act, to have developed habits of response. A third is their bodies. They're on the set for eight hours. They have to eat—though they can only eat what's been left for them in their kitchen—and they have to rest and they have to go to the bathroom. Another is David Levine, the author/director of the play. One day, for instance, he'll suddenly announce that everybody has to take a bath sometime that day.

What David Levine does is the opposite of participatory theater, where you're encouraged to feel a part of what's going on, but of course you're not really a part of it—you're just being patronized. With Levine's work, the lines are always clear: the actors in *Habit* are in their half-house, and you're free to walk around and look in through the windows, but that's it. It doesn't break the fourth wall, it *reinforces* it. You're left craning to peep. What you feel, though, is a new richness to your role as spectator. A play like *Habit* throws you back upon your interpretive effort as the generator of meaning; it reminds you of your end of the bargain. It is, in this way, closer to performance art than to theater, but the difference between some Fluxus dude living inside a gallery for a week and what's going on here is that the Fluxus dude has no narrative. His actions are just data points, but there's no incentive to figure out how to draw a line of best fit. It's just a person doing stuff. These, on the other hand, are characters moving toward some climax. You need a narrative to invite meaning.

We do this—we make meaning—even when we know that what we're witnessing is fundamentally random. Mitch puts on "Hurt" and we understand it: Viv has run off with the lock-box key, is cutting up lines on the bureau in the bedroom while Doug showers, and we hear: "I hurt myself today / to see if I still feel / Focus on the pain / the only thing that's real." It makes sense, and it deepens our sense of Mitch's character; he's made himself out as a music snob, has a whole monologue about the cultural relevance of Captain Beefheart, but here he knows that the song he wants to hear, and wants Viv to hear, is a gravely ballad built from the parts of an industrial pop track. But then Viv comes back into the room, coked up, and sits on the couch, and she and Mitch begin to have one of the play's climactic conversations. On the stereo, "Hurt" ends, and the next Johnny Cash song comes on unplanned. It's "The Rebel—Johnny Yuma," and it makes absolutely no sense. No director would've chosen this upbeat, cloppity hymn to a panther-quick, leather-touch lawbreaker of the West for a scene where Mitch tells Viv he accidentally killed her brother. But the random

song changes the scene, and the coked-up Viv seems to take the news in much better stride than she did in the last iteration, and that also makes sense.

Levine describes his aim as "opportunistic." What he tries to create are opportunities where the script, the characters, and stochastic processes conspire to create the sorts of feedback loops that we spectators have to work to process. The iPod generates "Johnny Yuma" and that changes the way the actors inhabit the scene, and the way the actors inhabit one scene bleeds into the next, and after the final murder or murders or murder-suicide we look back and try to draw a line to fit the data. And some of those data points seem random, and *are* random, but somehow in the process you begin to lose your sense of what it means that they're random; they're just *there*.

AFTER THE fourth iteration of the day—I'd been running around the house, chasing the meaning I was helping to create, for seven hours, constantly afraid I'd miss something, exhilarated by the prospect of being surprised by the next turn—I asked Levine at which point in the climactic argument he got a sense for who was going to kill and who was going to die.

"It's really hard to tell," he said. "Sometimes you think somebody's about to shoot and you realize there aren't any balloons nearby."

"Balloons?" The house was full of orange and black Halloween balloons. From time to time the actors inflated them laboriously mid-scene. You could tell they were the sort of thick balloons it took some real lung capacity to fill up. I took it as a symbol of their attempts to survive: it sometimes seemed as though their only effort was breathing, but that, for them, breathing itself was an effort.

"Yeah, balloons," Levine said. "Where do you think the gun pop comes from? When somebody shoots, one of the actors has to step on a balloon to make the sound. It can be the murderer, or the murderee, or even the third person in the room, if the timing can be coordinated."

"So, in that last iteration, the reason that Doug didn't kill Mitch at the end, when they were over there by the couch, was just because there weren't any balloons nearby?"

"Right. I was up in the balcony and could see him try to kick himself a balloon to step on, but it got away from him."

"Oh. I thought it was because he was thinking about the toast they'd shared that morning and the Ju-Jube fight they'd had later, and that he realized he just couldn't pull the trigger."

"Maybe it was that. But maybe there just wasn't a balloon." □