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Last Chance to Catch a 21st-century Flaneur—Before She Drifts Off

by Jerry Portwood



If 19-year-old Nada Gambier were an American teenager, she'd most likely be diagnosed with some manner of chemical imbalance and pumped full of psychoactive drugs to control her penchant for self-examination and obsessive-compulsive actions. Instead the highly analytical, young Finnish woman has been drifting around Europe (and now New York City) after graduating from high school spying on thousands. It's her self-expressed effort to collect more information so she feels confident in making life decisions. Nada reveals her mission in the simple, understated, yet highly charged theatrical presentation *Point Blank*, crafted by Edit Kaldor, that has its final performance tonight at P.S. 122.

Lacking much of the contrivances and gimmicks of similar earnest experimental one-woman shows, Nada is a 21st-century *flaneur*, drifting through cities and people's lives observing how they are constructed and judging which would be a good role model for her own. Armed with a digital camera with a super zoom lens, Nada has captured the banal and the basic: eating, sleeping, loving, living. During the deceptively simple performance, Nada speaks as if we were all friends, explaining her life in Finland, how she met Kaldor in Budapest and why she is now sharing her data. Her mission: To make one life decision by the end of the performance. She directs Kaldor, who sits at a laptop onstage, to click buttons and images appear on two large screens. Everything is so seamless and natural that the cynical New York audience (myself included) begins to try to intuit the catch: How are we being manipulated; is this all contrived, a set up? Are we being duped? Nada could be 19 or she could be 40, she has a face that doesn't reveal anything and seems so serene and full of trust. I wondered why she's a surreptitious voyeur, she could probably get anyone to open up

with her sweet demeanor and unhurried pace of speaking.

Blame it on being Scandinavian (those long, cold winters) or European (the lack of pop culture indoctrination), but the young-in-age Nada is highly cerebral and interested in the big existential questions: Why am I here? What should I do? Will it matter? Her documentation of others will supposedly help her figure out the answers. Unlike brainiacs of yore, she has the aid of technology and is now trying to organize her observations in a rational system. It's very philosophical, very Victorian. If she comes up with the correct taxonomy, she will then have solved everything. So, since she has decided to involve us in her decision making regarding her living situation—should she live alone or with a partner?—we are shown a organized tree of folders with subfolders nesting within subfolders, with photos of solitary people and others coupled. Nada explains the quirks of people eating alone (they go blank while chewing) and similar distasteful traits found amongst couples (they ignore one another and seem even more alone). At some point in the analysis I began to feel a creeping uneasiness. What began as a romantic investigation into human interaction now felt like a violation of some sort of societal trust. What would Nada discover if she had pried into my personal space? Do I need to be vigilant at all times, crafting a perfect existence so that this young woman or some other person has a proper role model? Doubts begin to arise. A feeling of empathy for a woman so wracked with confusion that she doesn't trust her intuition is replaced with a sort of annoyance at her unfair intrusion to intimate moments.

Ultimately, *Point Blank* is an investigation into serendipity and wanting to control one's potential and feeling consequential. While Nada explores these unknown, unimportant individuals during their daily lives, she also imbues them with weight by presenting them to an audience. It's like some Zen koan: If we did not attend or she did not happen upon them, does that mean they didn't exist? But a nagging doubt persists: We know that if we were to attempt rational decisions at all turns, we would kill the spark that makes life pleasurable. And as adults, we realize that we make mistakes and that doesn't mean our lives are ruined, we just change course and soldier on. And we all resolve at some point to keep living even if we never do anything that is of much importance beyond our own small grasp.

Nada's ultimate decision is indecision. She ends her presentation by deleting a folder, reordering photos, creating a new system by which to view her datum. Her ultimate message seems to be that she now realizes that she's engaged in a futile quest. Life is for living, and no amount of analysis—or spying—will allow you to accomplish a perfect existence.