

Bro'hood: believe it or else...

Medium is the message in Javaad Alipoor's immersive solo farrago



Lincoln Kaye | Oct 31st, 2018

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Me and my shadow, all alone an' feelin' blue. Image: Diwali in B.C.

In a startling twist on theatre-going norms, not only are we *not* ordered to shut off our cellphones as we settle into the

airless black box of the Cultch's Culture Lab; we're in fact enjoined to keep them live and loud and tuned into the encrypted messaging screens of WhatsApp.

That – along with Yorkshire accented soliloquys, on-screen projections, fluid pantomimes and GameBoy shoot-em-ups – is how artist/activist/analyst Javaad Alipoor means to buttonhole us tonight.

It's a compound medium all his own, to convey an urgent message, to wit: **the medium is the message...is the medium...is the message...***ad McLuhanesque delirium.*

But this infinite regress echo chamber has taken on terrifying new resonance in our own age of social media. It hands geeky sociopaths globe-spanning power to incite **stochastic terror** from their laptops or cellphones.

Whether the content of the messaging is Sunni fundamentalism or Aryan pride, Christian or Muslim end times apocalypse, there's an uncanny kinship among the target audiences: young, disenfranchised, aimless, solitary, resentful males avid for some – any – purpose in life. Or death.

So they're ripe to become the most ardent believers in whatever creed comes knocking. In that sense, they're brothers – or cognates – of each other, even if they subscribe to diametrically opposed ideologies. The more opposed, the tighter the kinship, in a way; bitterest enemies provide each other a dialectical *raison d'être*.

But there's a more enticing fraternity on offer in one's own ideological camp. A newfound fanaticism can supply even the loneliest loser with an instant worldwide brotherhood – and, crucially, sisterhood – of fellow-believers. Except there's the nagging need to always re-earn your co-religionists' trust with fresh acts of fealty.

That path all too often ends with a "bang" of martyrdom that leaves us non-believers agape in horrified bewilderment. But, to begin to fathom the phenomenon, Alipoor guides us to trace the trajectory back to where it begins: in a whimper of self-pity.

He introduces us to three true-believing "brothers" – a plashy, overlooked tech-nerd who winds up as cannon-fodder in Syria; an underemployed English midlands law grad who serves jail time as a low-grade ISIS courier and then returns to the killing fields for a promotion to the exalted status of suicide bomber; and a pimply geek who spews misogynistic neo-Nazi vitriol from the privacy and comfort of his Southern California bedroom to sway French and American elections.

All three, Alipoor admits, are composite characters. But they're compiled, he insists, from thousands of real-time safari hours among a wide spectrum of cyber-jungle fauna. All logged in without even camouflage or hunting blinds; he never disguised his identity as a Yorkshire-born non-observant Shiite Muslim of mixed parentage.

Gotta be grateful for his fortitude on our behalf. In the process he must have exposed himself to potential attack by notoriously violent actors, not to mention the suspicious notice of serried governmental cyber-policing agencies. But, even more daunting, he's had to imbibe unremitting geysers of bile from all quarters.

We get just the merest taste – a homeopathic microdose – of what he's faced through the venomous WhatsApp outpourings in the course of the hour-long performance: rape threats, racial slurs, unimaginative profanity laid on with a thick trowel. And, amidst it all, Alipoor polls us online about our estimates of the U.K. Muslim population or the most stomach-turning thing we've seen on the Net.

Our answers scroll up impartially on the message board, the earnest and rational ones right alongside the facetiously off-the-wall. "See?" Alipoor smiles, "the internet is the most truly democratic space in the world."

Whereupon our screen starts blazing anew with more hate speech. The contrast is unnerving between the wasp nest buzz of the phone's vibration and the gentle "ping" of incoming messages all over the room.

For a one-man show, the stage is wildly populous with Alipoor avatars. Now he's paddling back and forth in his swivel chair, then he's striding straight into the front row, next he's pontificating like Great Oz from a giant greenish projection of his face on a translucent screen.

Just behind this scrim, unperturbed, a bearded figure silently taps away at a laptop, gently nodding to something in his earphones and occasionally pausing to twiddle his cellphone. He looks calm – almost studious – like someone you might see at a public terminal in any VPL branch. No telling which – if any – of the believing brothers he might be.

Alipoor finishes his peroration and turns away from us, picking up his "joystick" to resume his interrupted video game. On the screen we see a hellscape of recognizable landmarks: an Eiffel Tower just barely discernable amidst the smoking ruins of the Champs de Mars, the steps of the New York Stock Exchange as viewed through gunsights. From the speakers, a rhythmic spatter of muffled explosions.

It's an impressive and important show ("Best of Fringe" in Edinburgh last year) that runs here through November 10 under the aegis of the 2018 Diwali in B.C.

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