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THEATRE



AARON LYNETT / NATIONAL POST

Playwright and performer Michael Healey — in his best-acted role — and choreographer and performer Peggy Baker rehearse *Are You Okay* — a walking show about existence and topography.

Life crisis without the mid

THEATRE REVIEW

Are You Okay

Factory Studio Theatre,
Toronto

BY ROBERT CUSHMAN

In *Are You Okay* Michael Healey talks and walks around the edges of the stage while Peggy Baker dances in the middle of it. It's a very satisfying, if occasionally puzzling, combination. The absence of a question mark from the title presumably means that no answer is required or expected. So I guess you could call this a rhetorical show.

It's gentle but searching rhetoric. Healey, whose contribution inevitably absorbs much of the attention of verbal animals like me, takes us through a day in the life. He lives, he says, at Queen and Ossington ("a terrible place to be if you're over 26"), and has a writer-in-residence's office at the Tarragon theatre, which is roughly at Bloor and Bathurst. Every day, he tells us — and I guess we have to believe him — he walks from home to office

and back again. That's quite a schlep, especially for someone who admits to having trouble even getting out of the house, but I was with him, mentally, every step of the way. At least, I was with him on the way there; I especially enjoyed his cynical sojourn on College. The route back, though, sounded suspiciously circuitous to me. (What was he doing over on Jarvis?)

His walking thoughts aren't all about local topography. Some of them are about the meaning of life, and they're very persuasive. He ponders the distinct possibility that insights he thought he got from Wittgenstein might really have come from Dr. Phil, and worries about the likelihood that someone might find out. He compares his own sense of purpose — unfavourably, I think — to that of a monk making his way through a labyrinth in the courtyard of Chartres cathedral.

Healey's writing in this piece is as good as anything he's done, while his acting is his best ever. He always seems to be playing himself, whatever the role, and here he's spared the pretence that he's playing anyone else. He comes

before us as a clear-but-baggy-eyed philosopher, improvising his way through his own secular maze of good intentions and mixed accomplishments. He's very confident about his own hesitations. He looks and sounds the right age and attitude to be having a mid-life crisis, but he spurns the idea in favour of something far more interesting: a life crisis. Vocally, physically and mentally, he worries at things.

And while he worries about time running out, Baker demonstrates what great use she's making of her own. Healey's in his 40s, she's in her 50s; in terms of career expentancy, as between dancers and actors and/or writers, the gap is far wider. But she doesn't seem to be pining about it. There isn't, as far as I could tell, much direct correlation between what he's saying and what she's doing, though there's a rare moment of contact when he arrives at his office door and she virtually pushes him through it. That should learn him. If he frets about repetition, she appears to accept and even celebrate it. There's a recurring action in her dance, a bending

and stretching, that suggests a visual ode to repetitive strain injury, except that where she's concerned there doesn't seem to be any strain. She's in great trim. Near the end of the show, Healey clears off the stage and she gets solo time, which she uses to communicate exultation. Or maybe the exultation is ours in seeing such grace, such discipline, such victory.

Healey starts the proceedings by introducing himself and everyone else connected. His own biographical details are correct, at least to my knowledge, except that he throws in a short riff about his own award-winning career in modern dance. This is an obvious fiction, possibly designed to clue us in that his later revelations may not be strictly factual either. He may not even walk to work. Not that that would invalidate the show. Among the others to whom he pays deserved tribute are Rebecca Picherack who did the lighting; Andrea Lundy who for once didn't, but is the production manager; Debashis Sinha who does the music; and Daniel Brooks, the director, whose production is yet another of his perfectly tuned precision instruments. The thing's a jewel.

■ *Are You Okay* runs until March 13. For tickets, call 416-504-9971 or visit factorytheatre.ca.

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