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Credit to the performance, and pandemic for unease watching The Look

Jenny Feniak

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Linda Grass stars in the North American premiere of *The Look*, presented virtually by Northern Light Theatre. Supplied photo by Ian Jackson.

TRENDING

The Look first saw the light of a stage in Australia in 1992. Playwright Alexa Wyatt tells this rather timeless tale that questions where our self-worth lies and the tough truths we all face with age. Friday night's virtual performance, delivered through vimeo, was the North American premiere of The Look, presented by Edmonton's Northern Light Theatre with director Trevor Schmidt at the creative helm.

Linda Grass embraces this manic, mortal protagonist adeptly, well rehearsed with emotion and authenticity. The set — a table laden with colour palates and creams, brushes, blushes, and lipsticks in every flushed shade — was simple yet gave her all she needed while backed by a screen with supporting visuals.

Billie Eilish Answers Increasingly Personal Questions

Grass is Marilyn Miles — was, Marilyn Hammond — the original covergirl for Estelle Cosmetics, now 60 and demonstrating products to new sales recruits. But Marilyn, in loud colours and a severe black bob, has repeated her training schpeel one too many times and — to say the least— goes off script. Cracks start to develop in her confident presence as doubts creep in about the mantras and marketing ploys she's been routinely delivering. What IS the message she's been embedding in these young, impressionable women?

STORY CONTINUES BELOW

Marilyn's self-worth, tethered to physical attraction, is taking a beating with the test of time so she ramps up her sales pitch, working to validate superficial beauty for herself as much as her captive trainees while wildly undulating between her polished persona and vulnerable id seeking real meaning in existence.

Her face is an ever-growing disaster of shimmery slicks and weepy, racooned eyes — attempts to fulfill her duty and prove her worth to Estelle while mental and emotional foundations slowly crumble.

We watch her disconnect with the reality she's known, unleash foul outbursts of emotion and regret all while insisting, repeatedly, "This is one of the best lectures I've ever given!"

O boy, I thought, hold on for this finale.

An emotional intensity accompanies anyone suffering an identity crisis and subsequent meltdown and, with so much of that already in our life this last year, this particular play wasn't the laugh I'd hoped for. Our personal context plays a part in the overall experience so this is not criticism of the play or its cast, in fact, quite the opposite. And I'm jubilant over the fact we have live theatre back in our lives at all so, and I'm still grateful to have it.

Time and exercise with this virtual delivery will undoubtedly smooth out the occasional video waver. And the slightly sharp audio could be my laptop speakers but there was one particular moment that seriously challenged my ears.

As Marilyn beings to come undone, she fumbles her clip-on microphone and slowly, awkwardly fishes it through her body-hugging dress. The persistent feedback that carried on was unbearable. So, I hit pause — immediate relief in one easy click. And with another, moments later, I was back with the action from the cosiness of home. And on a frosty January night, it's a pretty nice set up as a reviewer.

A photo of Linda Grass starring in The Look, presented virtually by Northern Light Theatre, while being viewed and reviewed at home. Jenny Feniak

jfeniak@postmedia.com



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