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The friendly specters of ‘Ghost Light’ work their incandescent charms



By **Peter Marks** June 19, 2017

NEW YORK — How refreshing it was this weekend to step away from the tempests stirred by that [Elizabethan ruckus-raising playwright](#) in Central Park and wander through the politically neutral, theater-adoring shadows of “Ghost Light.”

The new performance piece by the experimental audience-immersion theater company, [Third Rail Projects](#), makes seductive use of what feels like every square foot, onstage and off, of Lincoln Center Theater’s Claire Tow space, atop the Vivian Beaumont Theater. It is, in effect, Valentine’s Day for the length of “Ghost Light’s” run in the Claire Tow, as the vignettes you witness in the stairwells, from off stage left and right and inside the dressing rooms, form a veritable stack of love letters to the acting life.

“Ghost Light,” conceived and directed by Zach Morris and Jennine Willett and performed by a cast 16 strong, is the type of interactive show that should be replicated in every theater town in the country with a yen to take audiences by the hands — literally — and remind them of what the stage can do that no other entertainment platform can. The beguiling images and encounters it catalogues feel as if they’ve been designed specifically with you in mind. For though it’s a collective experience, the play also rekindles the singular sense of romance a playgoer nourishes over a lifetime.

Dividing 100 audience members into backstage groups of as small as four or five, the piece takes us on a tour of the legends that have accumulated over the centuries, about apparitions prowling the catwalks and empty stages, after the house lights are turned off and a single radiating fixture — the ghost light — remains. Theater ghosts, it seems, are anything but solitary figures. They trespass everywhere in “Ghost Light,” and we’re led, skillfully, through the narrow byways of the place, to stop at various designated stations and eavesdrop on the specters as they perform their daily, emblematic rituals.

In the green room, a stage hand (Josh Matthews) instructs us on how to punch in and mop up, and an usher (Donna Ahmadi), in a uniform out of the movies of the ’30s, gossips as she stuffs programs with advertising leaflets; from the wings, we watch as a young actress (Roxanne Kidd) in a body-hugging sequined gown repeats snippets of dialogues and gestures during a technical rehearsal. We’re invited into the dressing room of a bygone star (Rebekah Morin), who shamelessly solicits our compliments and asks for help with her lines; from overhead, we peer into the lobby bar, where a drunken group is carousing and being serenaded by a jazz pianist. And in a long back hallway an actor (Ryan Wuestewald), costumed like a Beckett clown, recites the lines of an existential monologue that he tells us is still being written.

Time, in other words, is bent in “Ghost Light” to the will of the theater makers. Actors play a scene, then play it again. The stage hand and the usher go through their spiels, and, until they start repeating themselves, or performing their activity in reverse, we think they’re talking to us. But they are hardly conscious of us at all: they’re illusions, conjured from another time. Music played at a piano in one room (by Elizabeth Carena) becomes the leitmotif in a danced scene in another. The model of a set displayed for us (by Julia Kelly) in a cramped backstage space materializes later in life size in another, larger room.

The effect is hypnotic and you should know, the interaction is only as invasive as you want it to be. (You’re welcome to remain a silent witness). Along the way, there are two long sets of stairs to climb, and many opportunities to sit — most rewardingly at the end, when the ghosts gather for one last lyrical convening, and you might wish that time really could stand still.