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U.S. | NEW YORK | NY CULTURE

‘Helen Lawrence’ at BAM: Where Hard-Boiled Meets High Tech

Actors appear both live onstage and, at the same time, beamed into a digitized screen world



Adam Kenneth Wilson and Haley McGee in 'Helen Lawrence' PHOTO: DAVID COOPER

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

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What happens when the imaginary “fourth wall” between theater actors and audiences is actually a translucent scrim? And how about a play that doubles simultaneously as a movie, using cameras to film and project the action back onto that scrim in real time?

Such questions will find an answer this week in “Helen Lawrence,” an ambitious cinema-meets-live-theater event at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, created by the boundary-pushing visual artist Stan Douglas with TV screenwriter Chris Haddock.

Drawing its story and spirit from the bygone world of film noir, “Helen Lawrence,” running Wednesday through Saturday as part of BAM’s Next Wave Festival, features live

actors in a hybrid performance format meant to be both unsettling and bemusing.

‘It took a long time to figure out where we were in space. Stan would be like, “Stop, stop—you’re walking through a wall.”’

—Actress Lisa Ryder, who plays Helen Lawrence

As actors play out scenes from a hard-boiled plot full of scheming and subterfuge, four cameras shoot the action and broadcast it simultaneously onto a see-through screen in front of the stage. Unlike the empty set behind, the projections appear within virtual surroundings, with the real-life action superimposed onto complex digital renderings of historical locations. In this multidimensional world, onstage characters sit in virtual chairs and ride in digitized trains.

“It’s almost like cubism—we see things from different angles, and our perspective is always being disrupted,” Mr. Douglas said of the effect.

Elaborate scenarios suit Mr. Douglas’s art, which delves deep into the meanings and implications of images from history as they have been created and consumed. Working primarily with video and photography, his art—typically in the form of installations in galleries and museums—often involves story lines too.

But none has been as sprawling and complex as “Helen Lawrence,” which also connects to a related body of photographs and a downloadable “art app” for digital devices.

‘In this postwar period, things were in flux and confused, uncertain. That sense of confusion is experienced by the audience as well.’

—Artist Stan Douglas

“Helen Lawrence” is set in Mr. Douglas’s hometown of Vancouver, British Columbia, shortly after World War II. It was a time when the shadow life of cities across North America—teeming with bookies, crooked cops, prostitution and secret speakeasy bars—

was thrust back into the spotlight, the artist said.

“There was a seedy underbelly that we know, but there was a transition that happened between the state of exception in wartime and the state of normalcy of the 1950s,” Mr. Douglas said. “How you get from one to the other is what I find curious.”

The grizzled black-and-white look he was going for derived in part from Weegee, the storied street photographer who captured ghastly murders and accident scenes in New York. He also found inspiration from film noir movies from the '40s and '50s, especially Stanley Kubrick's 1955 “Killer's Kiss.”

The story for “Helen Lawrence” focuses on a lone woman and her mysterious search for an old cohort making his way in the gambling underground. A corrupt police chief complicates matters, and related deeds take place in a bawdy alley where racial tensions ease only for the sake of illicit activity.

Mr. Haddock, the script writer whose TV credits include “Boardwalk Empire,” “MacGyver” and the new Canadian espionage thriller “The Romeo Section,” said he found inspiration from playing such old-fashioned material against the newfangled media created for its presentation.

The layered, high-tech experience of watching actors both live onstage and beamed on-screen is “almost trance-like,” Mr. Haddock said. “You're not quite sure where your eye should be drawn, and you wind up slipping through the whole experience not quite sure what you've seen and how it's been conjured.”

Lisa Ryder, who plays the title role, said acting in a part-analog, part-digital world introduces certain complexities.

With the stage empty and blank as if in a “green screen” shoot for a blockbuster movie, “it took a long time to figure out where we were in space,” Ms. Ryder said. “Stan would be like, ‘Stop, stop—you're walking through a wall.’ ”

Technology had to be developed specially for the production, with hardware and software designed to project footage back while it is being shot. During the performance, imagery from the four cameras is mixed live into the virtual backdrops, which were computer-designed after extensive archival research into old buildings and streets.

“You're seeing the reality and the illusion at once,” said Justine Durrett, a director at

David Zwirner gallery, which has represented the 55-year-old Mr. Douglas since 1993. “It makes you highly aware of how narrative and stories and images are constructed—something he’s been interested since the beginning.”

The artist himself said the idea for “Helen Lawrence” owed to similarities he sensed between the historical milieu and the present, with its societal conflicts, economic instability and generalized anxieties.

“In this postwar period, things were in flux and confused, uncertain,” Mr. Douglas said. “That sense of confusion is experienced by the audience as well. What is going on? What is this world that is being created before my eyes just as these people are making new lives for themselves?”

Experiencing it all live is important, he added: “Seeing it on video doesn’t do it justice, because it all makes too much sense.”

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