

Tony Massett: "Upstage," Fabulous Festival of Fringe Film. July 2011.

## **Upstage**

### **An Outdoor Video Installation by Lyla Rye**

*July 28 – August 1, 128 Garafraxa Street North*

by Tony Massett

The very nature of an outdoor installation involving projectors, screens and electronics is a complex affair fraught with logistical problems even on a good day with benign climatic conditions.

Located at 128 Garafraxa Street North in the main shopping area of Durham sits an empty lot surrounded by hoarding, former site of the Dell Theatre. This was Durham's original movie theatre, converted into a supermarket in 1961 and eventually morphing through a downward spiral of ignominy and vacancy to eventually founder in an inferno of arson.

For five days this empty site will be reawakened to invoke the mythology of memory. It will take the form of a video installation that plays with empirical notions of past and present, there and not there, as a loosely held structure closely aligned to the world of dream.

## **Lyla Rye**

Lyla Rye's site specific video installations are keenly tuned to the environment in which they are situated, pondering a mythology or anthropology whose intent is subtly camouflaged in the code of presentation. Her chameleon adaptations to the surrounding setting into which it's sited, successfully emulating the culture they critique. Her previous interventionist installations (kiosk, 2009) a permanent installation can be found at the Cadillac Fairview Mall Toronto ([www.lylarye.com](http://www.lylarye.com)).

## **Buster Keaton**

The narrative vehicle for the installation is a segment from Buster Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* (a silent era movie from 1924) Buster Keating one of the great comedic actors of the silent era, an actor of great physical prowess and remarkable facility with mime and clown, influenced by the European tradition of Commedia Del Arte.

Keaton plays the role of a cinema projectionist who falls asleep on the job. This ploy and the ensuing dream sequence propels Keaton into the movie within the movie and the fiction within the fiction. Keaton is challenged by an unpredictable shifting landscape, in a world wherein the film image literally shifts from land to sea to snow to desert to train tracks never hanging on to a specific reality for more than a few

seconds, leaving Keaton little time to adjust to circumstances before a new set arrives. This theatrical film contrivance allows for a fast continuity of sight gags, the perfect vehicle for the superb gymnastic ability that was the signature of Keaton and the comedy of the silent era.

## **Upstage**

Upstage as a noun, denotes that area, at or toward the back of a theatre stage. Upstage the verb; *to move toward the back of a stage to make (another actor) face away from the audience; hence fig. to overshadow, force into a disadvantageous position.*

Rye has digitally manipulated the original film image, inverting elements to create a theatre's proscenium arch that is projected onto an actual proscenium arch, the main physical feature of the installation. This arch construction frames the movie within the movie. The core imagery is projected through the arch onto the floor of the site upon which sits the theatrical artifice. Using the digital image as an archeological metaphor to locate the theatre beneath.

The pervasive presence of Keaton has been digitally removed from the projection leaving only a circular spotlight indicating his absence. A spotlight of incandescent brilliance, the paradoxical state of high visibility for the viewer yet blinding exposure to the performer, who is nailed and transfixed in the expectation of performance.

## **Circumstances**

Absence, presence and transformation are the comedic vehicle that Keaton exploits with exquisite timing and physical grace. Absence, the pre-existing reality, departed, for which preparedness seems futile. Presence the confusion with lack of preparedness for the new set of circumstances. Transformation, the saving grace of at least demonstrating a fine ability to dance, no matter who calls the tune.

The conceit of the projection is that the viewer/performer is able to step into the movie, emulating the manner of Keaton's original gesture of stepping from one fiction into another. The spotlight as portal, a request, inveigling performance, step from here to there. The consequence, a shadow dance in ever changing circumstance.

Participants with their backs to the projector will from their viewing perspective append their shadows, become the figure within the fiction. Stationary or gesticulating the interlocutor is in position to upstage the projection, or vice versa.

## **There and not There**

The Supermarket leaves a slight, indistinct trace of its former presence with the few remaining floor tiles suggestive of domesticity on a large scale. The Dell Theatre's ghost is a barely perceptible shadow, where the horizontal floor breaks off into a steep decline of the typically sloped seating arrangement slanting down to the cinema screen.

The absent Keaton, the absent Dell Theatre, invocations of lost time.