



## Q&A With Emily Mast: Restaging Peter Handke's "Offending the Audience"



Los Angeles-based artist Emily Mast spoke to East of Borneo about directing the play *Offending the Audience*, which opens this weekend at the Velaslavasay Panorama. Written in 1966 by Austrian avant-garde playwright and novelist Peter Handke, the play is a confrontational yet humorous deconstruction of the theatrical experience delivered without sets, costumes, or characters. Some examples of the dialogue include deadpan declarations: "There is no drama" and "Nothing is invented here," as well as fierce invectives toward the audience: "O you catatonics, O you schizoids, O you paranoids." For her version, Mast upended Handke's text, which she describes as "far too self-conscious to be listened to" by casting seven children to perform the play.

### When did you come across this text by Handke, and why did you choose it?

I'd actually never read any Handke before April of last year. I was doing an artist residency at Yaddo in Saratoga Springs, New York and I spent most of my time in my (intimidatingly gigantic) studio reading books about the history of avant-garde theater and the role of the audience therein. When I happened upon Handke's work, I literally danced. "Offending The Audience" is striking in many ways — it's incredibly straightforward, sometimes to the point of being terse, yet it succeeds in being poetic, lyrical, ridiculous, hilarious and poignant as well. It is a charming and disarming dissection of the theatrical experience and an ardent

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attempt at idealistic rebellion. It is also rather dated, however. I knew that I wanted to do an adaptation of the play, but I also knew that something big had to change in order to revitalize it.

**Were there other kinds of actors you considered working with before deciding to work with children?** I knew I wanted to work with children because they are so un-pretentious. Their humility and humanness allows the audience to experience the piece more empathetically than intellectually. Plus, kids inject chaos into every situation, and that is ultimately what most attracted me to working with them.

**Do the children grasp the existentialism in the play?** Not really. But I do think that after two and a half months of rehearsal they have started to comprehend what it means to be in the now (and now, and now). They are beginning to understand what pathos, empathy and death might mean. They understand that their role in this play is to make the audience aware and alive.

**Do you think more “pretentious-sounding, repetitive gibberish,” as you described the play when it’s read by adults, should be narrated by children?** Though I love repetition, I definitely do not condone pretension. The truth is, I find very few texts to be as wonderfully self-aware as Handke’s. Humor is already built into the text. When children take it on, the audience is removed from the artificiality of a critical discourse of artifice. Real play is introduced into a theatrical play that, for all of its avant-garde seminality is, to a contemporary ear, far too self-conscious to be listened to.

***Offending the Audience runs March 25-27. For more information, see the Velaslavasay Panorama website.***

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