

Theatre for a new generation?

It's like YouTube, only live

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Here's some advice for aspiring playwrights: Forget theatre school. Just start a blog.

Blogging has already supplanted print journalism. (Never mind if you're reading this in a newspaper. Some of my best friends are bloggers; they insist print journalism is dead.) More TV programs like CBC's *Exposure*, which debuted late last night, are pulling content from the Web. Now the high-tech realm is reaching into the most ancient art form, inspiring and in some cases forming almost all of the content of recent live performances and plays in New York.

Take *My First Time*. That's the off-Broadway play which enjoyed a burst of publicity a couple of weeks ago when its savvy producers announced that virgins would get in free to the first preview. Inspired by *The Vagina Monologues*, *My First Time* is an 80-minute collection of stories about first-time sexual experiences, performed by an eager-to-please quartet of two men and two women.

Like Eve Ensler's groundbreaking *Monologues*, which was based on a series of interviews conducted with women around the world, *My First Time* isn't so much written as it is constructed from stories written by real people. The stories can be read on MyFirstTime.com, a website started in 1998 that now boasts 40,000 entries (no pun intended).

Are they all real? Unlikely: After all, they're anonymous. But I'm not sure it matters, because the 34-year-old theatrical entrepreneur Ken Davenport, who also brought the world *Altar Boyz*, an off-Broadway musical comedy about a Christian boy band, has woven together a diverting evening of first-time tales that is by turns squeamishly comical, erotic, sentimental, galling, heart-rending and even mildly political.

And he's carried over the democratizing ethos of the Web into the performance itself.

If you're feeling inspired to share some of the dirty details of your own deflowering but you never got around to submitting your story to My First Time, you can still get some of it heard on a New York stage. Before the show begins, audience members are encouraged to fill out a survey card about losing their virginity. Questions include their age at the time, location, partner's first name, whether they felt pressured by anyone, whether

contraception was used, and what they'd say to their first sexual partner if they saw them now.

The cast reveals the contents of the cards, bit by bit, over the course of the evening. It's striking to witness the frisson of simultaneous dread and anticipation that runs through the audience when the surveys get pulled out. It's like the Internet come to life, complete with a shot at brief fame, albeit of the anonymous variety.

But *My First Time* is only the latest performance piece in town to make its way from the Web to the stage. For more than three years until it wrapped up in June, the monthly *WYSIWYG Talent Show* yanked bloggers out from behind their computer screens, made them change out of their pyjamas, and put them onstage at a downtown venue to bring their voice into the real (aka non-virtual) world.

And the late-night slot last Friday at Joe's Pub was occupied by *ROFL!*, a "live Internet variety show," presented in part by The Onion, featuring eight bloggers presenting their favourite picks from the Web: The video of a bikini-clad German gal hacking apart an old stereo receiver, from BikiniRama.de, was irresistibly goofy.

(The Web has invaded the sphere of in-home entertaining as well. The current issue of The New York Observer has a piece titled *The Laptop Who Came to Dinner*, about people bringing out their computers at parties to resolve factual or intellectual disputes.)

In some cases, blogs are merely one part of a show, as they are in life. *The Fabulous Life of a Size Zero*, which enjoyed a well-reviewed three-week off-Broadway run last month, captured the struggles of a teenaged girl to resist the snarky and demoralizing influences of celebrity tabloids and blogs, not to mention booze and bitchy girlfriends. Over the course of the play, characters' (fictional) entries on MySpace and LiveJournal would pop up on overhead screens. And the celebrity gossip blog Jossip.com, which helped promote the play, contributed squibs that changed through the run of the show.

Size Zero producer Isaac Robert Hurwitz said the partnership was perfect because the play had "a sort of mocking tone that mirrors a lot of the way Jossip mocks celebrity culture. It's very tongue-in-cheek, fun, bubble-gummy - with daggers underneath."

With a few fine exceptions, the theatre has been notoriously clueless when it comes to grappling with new technology. (Not as clueless as Hollywood, mind you: Anyone remember Sandra Bullock in *The Net*?) But as technology creeps into our lives in its not so petty pace, playwrights and directors are going to have to find ways to seamlessly incorporate it into plays, in both medium and message, or risk getting left behind.

Hurwitz says young playwrights are best equipped to handle the new themes, but there's a generation gap between them and producers who - by virtue of not being, shall we say, quite as young - may not care about the issues that are of interest to younger audiences.

"I don't think the full range of voices has been represented. I hope that continues to change, that we can continue to support new voices," says Hurwitz. "If we do, I'm sure we're going to find interesting and innovative ways of integrating the things that are part of people's lives, that exist outside of the theatre, into the theatrical experience."

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