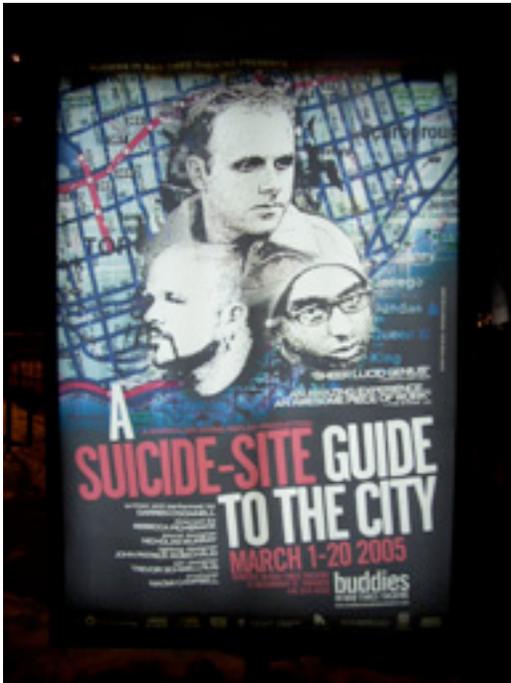




## ARTS

### Darren O'Donnell's Suicide Guide to the City

Posted by <http://www.blogto.com/author/timothy/> MARCH 5, 2005



I've mentioned Darren O'Donnell before in this [review](#) I wrote on January 1st, and in the past week I've kept seeing his name around – you'd think he was famous or something. His name's on the cover of this week's [Now](#), he's gotten mentioned on [The Torontoist](#), and he was mentioned last week on blogTO regarding a certain [contest](#). Today, his latest play *A Suicide Site Guide to the City* got reviewed in the [Globe and Mail](#), where Kamal Al-Solaylee wrote, "...only audiences who haven't been to the theatre in say, a few decades, are expected to be dazzled by the presentation".

That sentence applies to me. I'm not a theatre person. The last play I saw was Darren's production of *pppeeeaaaccee* last September, which I didn't appreciate as much as I loved *Suicide-Site Guide*, for reasons shared with Darren since he's a friend of mine, and no point going into here. So, yeah, that's the bias.

The truth is I'm writing this review because I said I would and I wanted free tickets since I'm broke, so I played the media card. Which might make everyone think that this review is going to be good only because he's my friend. Well, I

hope to show that isn't the case. I hope to convince you that this is a play you should see while you have the chance, because I was dazzled, not being a theatre-going person, and I was dazzled for reasons that I want to lay out here. Having been honest with you, dear reader, reading this sometime after I type it out on Saturday afternoon, is something I do partially because that is what Darren's play seemed to be about for me. The expression of honesty, honesty that included telling us when and where the lines he was reciting were written, and his thoughts as he wrote them. His play is about being honest and sincere through a craft that is based on being insincere, acting being nothing more than pretending to be something else, a performance based on text composed at some point in the past.

The effect of which means that his 80 minute monologue comes across almost like a narrated journal and a letter to the audience who occupy two places in the production – the first is the imagined one Darren had in mind as he typed his script, and the second is the one you find yourself sitting in. The overlapping conceptions of something both once imagined and now real play off each other – Darren is really playing with the part of text that we almost always take for granted, that it is a communication directed forward in time, rather than the spontaneous discourse that we participate in during a conversation.

To not see this play may mean you'd watch TV instead, where you might see the Establishment reward itself by finding reasons to broadcast something on the 1960s and perhaps bring up the Camelot Kennedy Administration, lulled into nostalgia between botox advertisements and punditry on the environmental movement being a bunch of phooey and debating gay marriage. Or, you could go see a live action, real-life document of what it means to be young and locked out of being able to influence the said-same Establishment, hungry for change and the frustrations of trying to make a difference when the whole system seems designed to make us feel small, worthless, or arrogantly presumptuous if we think we can.

Darren and I are certainly on the same page when it comes to the Left Wing political slant, but while he'd love to be a violent revolutionary, I'd prefer to think that the system's problems will disappear with the retirement of the

perpetrators. I'm of the 'violence only begets more violence' school, so while I'm sympathetic to Darren's anarchist leanings, I don't share them, and am in fact glad that he's a playwright and not a politician in which case the frustrations could be a little dangerous.

Although I'm tempted to label him 'a voice of this generation', that's lame, especially since this generation can speak for itself, and is doing so through blogs. At least that's my impression. And I bring up blogs partially to further this review down the path toward a discussion of 'orality'. Once again I have to bring up John Ralston Saul, which I'm embarrassed to do – you'd think I'd have some original thoughts once and while, why simply be his parrot? Well, if generations can have voices speaking for them, so can individuals, voices that give others the words to express what they may intuit, and in my case John Ralston Saul has illuminated the Canadian landscape in ways that make me marvel. And I figure if Arthur Danto can work Hegel into most of his pieces, why the hell shouldn't I be as brazen with my intellectual hero? So anyway, Saul has this whole thing about 'orality' and how Canada's an oral based culture, a talking culture, one that differs from France, for example, which is a nation constructed around text – constitutions, revolutions, declarations, and les Grammaires Petite Larousse. One of the first projects of Darren's I became aware of was *The Talking Creature*, where he basically got people to meet in Kensington Market's park and chat. In light of Saul's arguments, that seems to have been a very Canadian thing to do. And now, with *Suicide Site Guide*, that Canadian tradition favoring talk over text continues.

Because, as I said earlier, the play is like a recited journal it reminds me of the fact that journals are now flourishing as a literary form through blogs. I've kept a journal since I was a teenager, a habit that was partially inspired by the reading of biographies, but because of their influence, I was always painfully self-conscious that I was communicating mostly to a future self (as Darren does in one point in the play, accepting a phone call from his past self typing the lines two years ago) but also to posterity, since even if you live a boring mediocre life, a diary will be interesting to somebody at some point down the line (ala Samuel Pepys). Now this self-consciousness, one that for me limited the revelation of scandal, is infused in everyone as they publish what was once held under lock and key on the global networked interface, spilling secrets

and [bringing down trials](#) through their indiscretions. Privacy now appears to be a choice rather than a right as people seek communication.

Saul argued ten years ago that the development of the 18th Century pamphlet and the 19th Century newspaper was a way for educated citizens to reclaim language which had fallen into the control of those who thought only in Latin. The poets Dante and Petrarch are credited with kindling the Italian Renaissance seven hundred years ago by writing their poems in the vernacular, asserting the language of the 'common people' worthy of beauty, and hence, we have a government system founded on the House of Commons, a talking creature based on the common language of the common people, something we all are in our supposedly classless society, and especially true when we aren't being academics and instead human beings who share the common experiences of emotional turmoil and cultural products.

In raising these points, Saul was arguing in the pre-internet Dark Times, when language had once again fallen into the control of (what we now call) the traditional media and academics – who he labeled scholastics, after the late medieval scholars whose only aim was to tie up arguments in minutia (like those scenes in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* where they debate the minor points of Christ's poverty).

Like the talky nature of 19th Century newspapers, today we have blogs, like the one you're reading, the writing style of which is based on being talky rather than 'texty'. Written as if spoken. Written with little regard for the formal constraints.

As is the case with Darren's play.

So, now, if you're asking yourself, why should I see this play? Well, the main reason is that I've turned this review into an essay on 'why I think Darren O'Donnell's *A Suicide Sit Guide to the City* is great'. I've done so because I don't know enough about the theatre to be as critical as Kamal Al-Solaylee at the Globe. And, most importantly because *I don't want to give anything away*. Delighted as I was by its narrative strategies and contrivances, which came as a continual surprise, I was dazzled by Darren's turns through sincerity and sarcasm, his desire for love, and his capacity for potentially embarrassing self-revelation. And above all, I was dazzaled by the way it came across as a live action blog, a challenge to the status quo of formality and controlled language,

by freeing itself to be humane, to communicate even it's inherent lies, as being something presented long after it was conceived in front of a computer in another part of the city, some time ago. While the *suicide* in the title is misleading, it seems to ultimately be a play on the death of the author with all puns intended, a fact that we die constantly as our present selves morph into our future selves, and what this might mean toward everything. So, highly recommended, ten stars or whatever, and if you see it and think I'm just biased and probably think too much, that's what the comment form below is for.

*A Suicide Site Guide to the City* plays at [Buddies](#) until March 20th. Directed by Rebecca Picherack and also featuring Nicholas Murray (aka murr) and John Patrick Robichaud.

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**THE PR:**

Written and performed by Darren O'Donnell

Directed by Rebecca Picherack

A Mammalian Diving Reflex Production

*A Suicide-Site Guide to the City* is a stand-up essay about life's suppressed potential. Writer/ performer Darren O'Donnell shares thoughts, musings, a little lecture and a little magic in an effort to understand the impulse of suicide, envision a better world, and of course, entertain the audience. Culled from journals, field recordings, found art, home video, air travelogues and audience participation, the piece addresses the confusion, ennui and impotence felt in response to the attacks of September 11th, the erosion of civil liberties in North America and beyond, and America's growing imperial project, among other topical subjects. It's an explosive comedy offering ideal entertainment for the end of the world.

[http://www.blogto.com/arts/2005/03/darren\\_odonnells\\_suicide\\_guide\\_to\\_the\\_city/](http://www.blogto.com/arts/2005/03/darren_odonnells_suicide_guide_to_the_city/)