

Valparaiso and Postmodern Theatre (Program Notes)
Rockhurst University Theatre
November, 2002

When you visit an art museum, you arrive expecting to find a wide variety of periods, styles, and forms, some that appeal to you, others that don't. You find yourself lingering in rooms with works that please or engage you, while hurrying through other rooms, wondering why such works have been collected or why they are even considered "art." You note that some works defy understanding and explanation; they may even offend your aesthetic or moral sensibilities. You share your insights with your companions, praising this and lambasting that, all the while noting that your interpretation and appreciation of particular pieces may differ significantly. You agree to disagree: this is art after all, and you know that beauty does indeed reside in the "eye of the beholder."

When you attend the theatre, however, you probably expect that you and your friends will be engaged and entertained, that you will be told a story skillfully penned by the playwright and competently brought to life by the production. You anticipate an experience for which your high school English teachers and college professors have labored to prepare you—the "well-made play" with its familiar vernacular spoken by recognizable characters who encounter crises that yield a climax before everything is tidily brought together in a decipherable and satisfying, though not necessarily happy, resolution. This you understand and expect.

There is nothing wrong with this; indeed, this type of theatre has commanded our stages, cinemas, and televisions for generations. But what happens when you run into something that that goes beyond or even contradicts this familiar model? What do you do when you encounter the theatrical equivalent of an abstract expressionist painting, a David Lynch film, or an MTV music video? Chances are that if it confuses you or contradicts what you were taught all your life about theatre, then it must be wrong—that it is "bad." But maybe not...

To use a simple analogy, we're dealing with apples and oranges here: we've been raised in an apple orchard and know how to recognize and appreciate "good" apples. But now with *Valparaiso*, we've been given an orange. We might try to apply our apple sensibilities, but, no matter how hard we try or wish it to be, this orange will never be an apple, nor can it be judged by apple standards. To do so would be like condemning an abstract expressionist painting because it doesn't look like real life, or a David Lynch film because it could never really happen, or an MTV music video because too much is going on at once.

Valparaiso is part of a different way of thinking, writing, and performing that is best identified as "postmodern." Both text and production strive to provoke you with images, words, and thoughts that raise questions without ever answering them. What you make of what you hear and see, how you decode and interpret, is your responsibility. Our responsibility as the producing agent is to ensure that we provide you with enough stimulation to make you want to wrestle with the piece and its unending questions...not only now but for weeks to come.

Why are there two Michaels and two Livias? Did Michael actually commit suicide? Why is his head in all the TVs? Why does Delfina kill Michael during her show? Why is Delfina played by a man? Why all the music and videos? Is there a point to all this, even a discernable meaning? The answers, if they exist, reside only in you.