

*Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind* by the Neo-Futurists, March 1997.

"30 PLAYS IN 60 MINUTES! RANDOM ADMISSION! NEW PLAYS EVERY WEEK! NEW AUDIENCE EVERY NIGHT! WHEN WE SELL OUT, WE ORDER OUT! THE SIMULTANEOUS CLASH OF OPPOSING EMOTIONS, CONTRADICTORY IDEAS, AND SEPARATE REALITIES!"

The Neo-Futurists spare both expense and coyness in the program notes for their production of *Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind*, which takes place above a run-down funeral home in downtown Chicago. On a no-frills, 11 1/2" X 10" sheet of paper, Xeroxed photos of the company's nine members frame a 30-course "menu" for the weekend's performances. Also included in the data-packed program is a section announcing upcoming productions, workshops with Greg Allen and Karen Christopher (the company's founders), and promotional information about the New York production of *Too Much Light*. Always attuned to the latest technology—as any good Futurist should be—the company offers website and e-mail information as well.

Now in its ninth year of production, the Neo-Futurists' *Too Much Light Makes The Baby Go Blind* is the object of a near cult following in Chicago; and understandably so. For newcomers and habitual audiences alike, the entire experience of *Too Much Light* is refreshingly unembellished and spare, yet surprisingly theatrical.

The night begins at 10:30 p.m. when the Neo-Futurarium doors open to a waiting crowd of young-to-middle-aged theatergoers. Although the show starts at 11:30 p.m., patrons arrive early to secure seats in the small theatre space. As they enter, each person is handed a laminated card on which the words "admit one" are printed. For the next hour, patrons are invited to browse the Presidential Gallery—actually a narrow hallway lined with *unique* portraits of the American Presidents. My personal favorite is Gerald Ford's portrait. Where the President's face *would* be is a framed blank space overlaid with a sliced-up copy of the Constitution. In addition to perusing politically incorrect artwork, patrons are encouraged to sip coffee, eat cheesecake, and listen to local musicians who perform for tips in a rectangular room littered with chairs, small tables, and outfitted with a "stage" at one end.

But in case the spectator might think that this is the playing space for *Too Much Light*, she is in for another surprise. At 11:30 p.m.—showtime—patrons are instructed to approach the doors on either side of the "stage." It is time to roll for admission. Each patron rolls a six-sided die, then adds four to the number rolled in order to determine the cost of the show. One of my companions got lucky and rolled a one. I, on the other hand, rolled a four—but nine bucks is still a great

deal in this case. As patrons enter the playing space, each is given a name tag, presumably inscribed with her/his name. Of course, theatergoers quickly discover that the name tags are just another aspect of the evening's randomness. My name was "Mixed Drinks" on my visit.

Permeating the entire Neo-Futurarium atmosphere is the notion of chance. Although there is a set "menu" of plays, audience members determine the order of performance by randomly calling out numbers when the show begins. Generally speaking, it appears that patrons bearing the most powerful vocal chords direct the course of events. Although titles like "Uzi Does It," "Dark Secrets #763," and "Desperate Times, Desperate Measures, Or Get The Fuck Down" may provoke predictably obnoxious responses in some audiences, virtually every performance turns out to be an exercise in improvisation with the audience in charge.

*#26. "Don't Eat Anything The Color Of A Lifejacket" — A small wooden table is illuminated by a single bright light. Wearing a brilliant—almost glow-in-the-dark—orange life jacket, Steve enters carrying a medium-sized cardboard box and sets it on the table. Slowly, deliberately, and reverently, he begins to pull items from the box: cheese puffs, orange peanut marshmallows, candy corn, and cheese whiz. All of the items are lifejacket orange. Steve rebelliously squirts cheese whiz into his gaping mouth. Blackout.*

The improvisation often extends to the minimal technical elements of the production as well, blurring the boundaries of who is performing. At one point during the evening, the sound/light operator joined the performance when two particularly "high-tech" plays were back-to-back. The dialogue that ensued was spontaneous, entertaining, and absolutely necessary, given the circumstances.

*#4. "Snap" — Lights come up on Heather, who is seated on a tall stool. She is surrounded by the other women in the company. Together, they form a quasi-triangle. Quietly, Heather shares her feelings of helplessness concerning a dangerously-thin friend. The women surrounding her repeat particular words from Heather's monologue: thin, fragile, delicate. Heather speaks of her friend's own fear and anxiety about being hurt, physically, by men. As Heather describes the horrible fragility of her friend, she snaps plastic silverware into a glass bowl. Blackout.*

While it is true that live theatre always has the potential to be fresh and new, under such conditions, it cannot help but be raw—and therein lies the appeal of *Too Much Light*. For audience members who are accustomed to traditional,

no-surprises realism, to see nine company members risking themselves, relying on one another, and engaging with the audience is quite refreshing.

#12. *"The Coffee Mug Repertory Company Of Chicago Presents Star Wars™, Distinctive Rendition"* — *The theme music from George Lucas's Star Wars™ plays prominently as the lights slowly come up. A pre-recorded voice introduces the all-star coffee mug cast: the Princess Leia mug as Princess Leia, the Garfield mug as Han Solo, the Tasmanian Devil mug as Chewbacca, and a Mr. Coffee coffee pot as Darth Vader. The action begins with the Princess Leia mug who shrieks, "Where is my head." Meanwhile the Darth Vader coffeepot, filled with steaming coffee, approaches. As "he" pours the coffee into Leia's head, she screams a shrill, piercing scream.*

Even when the performance has ended and all thirty plays have been performed, the Neo-Futurists once again submit themselves to the dictates of chance by asking an audience member to cast a die to decide their future. The number rolled determines how many new plays must be written and incorporated into *Too Much Light* for the following week's performances.



The neo-futurists, cast of *Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind*. (Photo courtesy of the company).

#2. "Martini" — Lights up on Geryll who sits behind a small table looking seriously at the table's contents. On the table is a rich-looking silver tray containing all of the ingredients necessary to make a martini. Geryll very methodically mixes herself a double. When she is finished, Geryll looks thoughtfully at the martini, then downs it in one drink. She leans back, looks at the audience, and says, "My husband left me."

Like the original Futurists, the Neo-Futurists embrace a fast-paced, ever-changing, un-histrionic aesthetic. Actors play themselves in instantaneous plays mined from their own lives. Taking their cue from the fascistic politics of the "father" of the Italian Futurist movement, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (who is credited in the program's acknowledgments), the Neo-Futurists embrace their own brand of anti-establishment rhetoric. Although their microscopic plays and production notes are good-naturedly confrontational when compared to Marinetti's instructions to "wreck the venerable cities pitilessly,"<sup>1</sup> the reckless spirit of futurism does prevail at the Neo-Futurarium. As the program notes for *Too Much Light* explicitly state, "it's better to hurl yourself screaming naked into the void than to lie down and sleep with it." Yet, despite their roots, the Neo-Futurists do exemplify a new brand of Futurism—one with a decidedly social conscious.

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## Note

1. Quoted from the first Futurist Manifesto, written in 1909 by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti. Portions of the Manifesto appear in David Zinder's *The Surrealist Connection*. (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980).