

Social Media Examined



Tapping and scrolling away on phones, tablets or laptops, nearly everyone lives a life – perhaps even a double one – in the online world.

One needs no reminder of this, though a play such as *Digital Natives #NoFilter* forces us to come face-to-face with the reality that our online personas may be only a shadow of who we really are. Comprising three interesting and original works, the play's theme is about exploring the role of social media in our lives.

I had the chance to meet with the mastermind behind this concept, Amanda Hardwick, Artistic Director for ASPA-FTV (Australian School of Performing Arts, Film and Television). Crediting her fascination with social media, Amanda recognises how big a part it plays in the lives of students (generally and from the school), narrowing in on how we portray ourselves virtually vis-à-vis real life. With her were Talia Rowley, Director of the *Digital Natives* play, and two students from the school, Jackie Murtagh and Seth Collier. I was surprised at how young Jackie (14) and Seth (10) were and the fact that they were to perform at the Cremorne Theatre about a topic that many fear to address. These youngsters are Digital Natives; a noun for a person raised during the age of digital technology who is thus familiar with computers and the internet from an early age. However, contemplating the virtual/real personality divide is also an exercise for 'Digital Immigrants' – the rest of us adults living in the same technological era.

Jackie and Seth claim that they can "definitely relate" to the play, even at such a tender age. They agree that fashioning an enhanced online persona is not a skill that is taught, but rather something

that emerges quite readily. It is about how people want everyone else to see them in a certain way, so they create their profiles accordingly.

This urge to impress is strong, even addictive. The disparity between the real and virtual self widens when social media is used for escapism. The appeal of this escapism derives precisely from the fact that one can mould one's persona to whatever one wishes it to be, such as an ideal version of oneself *sans* one's unpleasant realities. "It's a love-hate relationship," says Talia of the students' relationship with social media, "but they can't stop from going back for more."

With a message that seeks to remind everyone that who we are is sufficient, I was curious as to whether the group could encourage this in practice through their production. Could people be moved to reveal their honest selves in front of others, both online and off? Amanda and Talia agree that it is important to "have a good strong self-talk; a strong support system" to remind ourselves that it is okay to be who we are. The message is timely for both Digital Natives and Immigrants alike. "We are a part of social media and we engage just as much," says Amanda. While the play may be confronting, viewing our distortion of reality onstage can be the first step to questioning our own virtual/real personality inconsistency, reminding us that, in Amanda's words, "The most important friend request to accept is the one we send to ourselves."

Catch *Digital Natives #NoFilter* at the Cremorne Theatre, QPAC on 13 December 2014.

Words – Rachel Lee