

# White Noise

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June 9, 2012 By [John Barry](#) [Leave a Comment](#)

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*White Noise*, performed by Wanderlust Theatre at the Fridge this weekend, is a play that's impossible to separate from the exhibit of paintings by DC artist Tom Block. So I'll begin by describing the paintings themselves.

Okay ....

You walk in, there are two huge paneled works that, at first glimpse, conjure up the obvious comparison to Jean-Michel Basquiat. Large, flowing 10 panel panoramas, *Jiwar* and *Conference of the Birds* are punctuated with Jungian motifs: phallic fingers, anguished faces, eyes, and teeth. Each panel goes for \$2400.



Gigi Buscaglio as Joan with Jeff Kirkman III as Tim (Photo courtesy of White Noise)

But closer inspection indicates that Block may not make the minimum wage on these. They are intricately layered with pen scribbling, including Arabic text, children's drawings (apparently Block's own children), cartoonish noodling, and layers of expressionist dribbling. I looked closely for quasi-ironic references that usually accompany text in artwork. Nope. The closest I came was on the third panel, a tiny scribbled pen-

and-ink equation, buried under layers of paint: *Moose = Bullwinkle*. But even the handwriting seems painstakingly applied.

The panels, actually, wouldn't look bad in a living room, but that's not what they are about. It's all about process: what must have been a whopping, frustrating, painstaking, and revelatory assembly of memories, scribbles, mystical texts, and nightmares.

I started looking around for the artist, expecting to find a chain-smoking wide-eyed mystic in the corner clutching a bottle of vodka. That's not what I found. Tom Block is a family man, living in DC, with a firm handshake, a Long Island accent (at least that's what I heard), and a sense of humor.

Had he seen *Red*, the Broadway hit about Rothko? I asked. "Yeah," he said, "But Rothko shot himself." Isn't that what abstract expressionist painters are supposed to do? He acknowledged that, yes, it might help sales. But he just doesn't look the part.

As the paintings indicated, there's a lot going on beneath the surface of this particular artist. And *White Noise* is, unabashedly, an attempt to explore it. With director Roselie Vasquez-Yetter, he's used this work to painstakingly explore his own thought process, as he works in the lonely world between spiritual, theoretical, and artistic. The end result isn't easy to classify as entertainment. And *White Noise* is clearly Block's first play: he isn't nearly as comfortable with the possibilities of the stage as he is with the canvas. But in concert with his works, it's an odd and even courageous attempt by an artist to get under his own skin. In concert with his work, it's a fascinating experience.

As far as the plot goes, my expectations were proven false. I was waiting for an abstract, movement-oriented exploration of motifs, but *White Noise* is almost drawing room drama. An African American artist (Tim) travels to Detroit for an exhibit, sponsored by a couple, Joan (Gigi Buscaglio) and Dick (Josh Canary). This is an aging, bickering couple, wealthy (thanks to Northrop Grumman), stingy, and tormented.

Tim (Jeff Kirkman III) arrives in the midst of a heated squabble. Little is said about his art, but what follows is an extended discussion of his struggle, his own chosen Muse, Simon Weil (portrayed beautifully by actor and dancer Lauren Kieler), and spiritual self-realization. If that sounds dry, it's not: as the play progresses, it disintegrates into a *mélange* of Jungian motifs, sexual hang-ups, racial prejudices and other demons of the modern age. Sally (magnetically played by Tina Thomas) seems to be at the core of the explosion: an aging rape victim who, inexplicably, has decided to host him for his visit.

Like Block's paintings, it's a crazy *mélange* of process and imagination. The actors do an admirable job – Kirkman, in particular, had the unenviable task of filling in at the last moment and playing the central role. One gets the impression that a few more weeks would have helped the actors orient themselves, but, even so, the production is a fascinating peek at the side most artists don't want us to see: the creation (and deconstruction) of the persona. Tim arrives as a self-made guru of eastern wisdom; by the end of the play, he's a hypocritical addict of Internet Porn.



Desiree Miller, playing her original score: *White Noise*

If the play itself is cerebral, the musical score, composed and performed by cellist Desiree Miller, offers a perfect background. Modern, expressionist, and dramatically expressive, it seems to bore further into the mind of the artist than even the script does.

Time and space requires that I stop here, but believe me, there's a lot going on in this 80 minute production. It's not strictly a night at the theatre, though. It's a night in the gallery, a fascinating and rewarding look at the multiple dimensions of faith, theory, and inspiration that go into Block's work.

*White Noise* closes Sunday, June 10, 2012. There are three performances left: at 8 on Saturday, and on Sunday at 2 and 7 pm. One word of advice: arrive early to give yourself at least a half hour to look at the two sprawling, hypnotic murals that form the backdrop of the play. And bring a magnifying glass.

Performed at The Fridge, 516 1/2 8th Street, SE, Washington, DC.

[Details](#)

[Tickets](#)

## **White Noise**

written by Tom Block

directed by Roselie Vasquez-Yetter

Produced by Wanderlust Theatre

reviewed by John Barry

*Recommended*

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