



THURSDAY, NOVEMBER 07, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: To Delete or Not To Delete, That Is The Digital Question in "User Not Found"

**USER NOT FOUND** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**BAM NEXT WAVE AT GREENE GRAPE ANNEX**

The UK theater company [Dante or Die](#) specializes in site-specific performances. Hotel rooms, self-storage units, ski lifts -- they've been there, done that. The company's latest show is *User Not Found* and it takes place in an actual café, in this case Brooklyn's Greene Grape Annex near BAM. As part of the Next Wave festival, [Dante Or Die](#) delivers a meditation on grief in our digital age. Audience members aren't just seated in the intimate space of a working café. They're also given headphones and a cell phone which displays key bits of information like text messages and social media posts. As with so many envelope-pushing shows, you can't help feeling more time was spent working out the bells and whistles of how it will all work rather than the actual story.

That story is a familiar one. Terry (played by Terry O'Donovan) is occupying his usual seat at the local coffee shop, pointing out other regulars and their various quirks. Then Terry gets a text from a friend expressing their deep sorrow. That, of course, would send a chill down anyone's spine. But Terry has to receive eight more (and a phone call from an older woman, which he doesn't answer) before ponderously texting back that he doesn't know what has happened. What are people texting sympathies about? And then it clicks. Terry dated Luca (sic) for about nine years and then Luca broke up with him. And now Luca is dead. As Terry says, first Luca left him and now Luca's left the world.

Terry is distraught, as anyone would be. Clearly Terry hadn't gotten over the break-up yet. As if the pain and grief weren't bad enough, Terry discovers a very modern twist to all this. When they were still together, Luca named Terry his digital executor. Terry now has full



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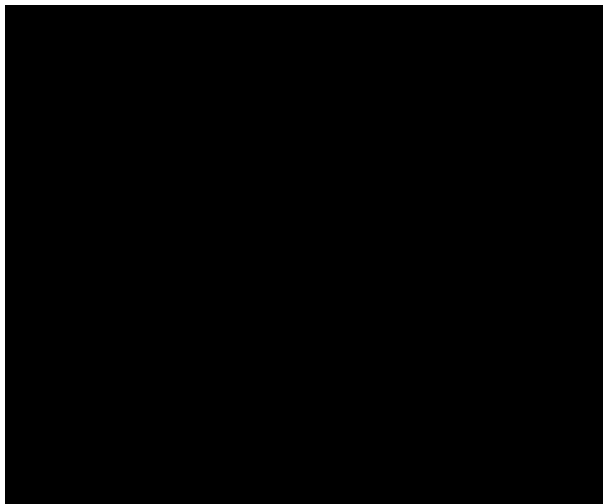
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access to all of Luca's social media accounts and must decide what if anything should be preserved and what should be tidily erased from the internet. It's the five stages of grief, 2.0.

Possibilities abound. Luca blocked Terry from his Facebook account (and presumably Twitter et al), which Terry says he appreciated -- less possibility of turning into an online stalker, he confesses cheerily. Now Terry can see exactly what Luca has been up to since they separated. Did Luca have an online journal? Did he have an account on a gay dating app? Did he have an account on a gay dating app before they broke up? But none of the voyeuristic possibilities are explored. No secrets are revealed.

Instead, Terry grieves over his lost love while looking at public Facebook posts and the like. Terry also reconnects with Luca's mother Maria who, in one of the show's few subtle touches, mentions in a text she regrets not asking Terry to speak at the memorial. Really, he just mourns and remembers why he loved Luca in the first place and all those digital files help him do so. Terry might just as easily be sorting through Luca's closet or cleaning out his desk drawer, clutching a beloved t-shirt or discovering a birthday card Luca tucked away. The result would be the same.



Technology adds very little to *User Not Found*. The piece is a monologue and the information we get via headphones and cell phone (or should I say mobile?) is minimal and mostly unnecessary. It begins with some scene-setting music by Norah Jones and background chatter. But why over headphones? In fact the room is filled with the music before we put on the headphones so it makes a seamless transition. But why transition at all? Most of the time, we're not hearing the inner thoughts of Terry. We're watching him talk out loud and then hearing the audio feed. It leaves his performance at an

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unnecessary remove.

Further, the texting and other visual information is generally clunky and slow. Why does it take Terry so long to text someone to ask what the heck they're offering condolences about? And when he does text it's very cumbersome indeed and I can't imagine why. The same is true when Terry scrolls through Luca's social media. It takes forever and is quite unrevealing.

Terry focuses in on one photo of Luca holding a balloon and it was actually more powerful just to listen to him describe it rather than actually look at the darn thing. Hmm, we can look at a music video from one of Luca's favorite artists...or we can watch Terry talk about that annoying pop artist and eventually break down as the song hits him emotionally. And when Terry describes a leopard (or panther? or lion? some cat-like creature, anyway) coming into the café and prowling around the other customers it's a lot more interesting to imagine than anything we might see on screen. Yes, they sweeten the mix with the howl of the creature, but Terry already fired our imagination without it.

Again and again, the bells and whistles of the tech got in the way. With the audience isolated in headphones for much of the show, I understood why they sweetened the mix with some low-key canned audience laughter at appropriate moments. Still, it was distracting. Other ideas worked better, like the time Terry was leaving a voice mail message...and kept leaving it on the audio track but in real life addressed us and said his message was even boring himself. Terry struggles to remember some moments...and photos of them appear blurry on the screen of the mobiles we're holding. A fine idea though it had little dramatic impact for me. Ditto the many abstract videos meant to convey the emotional turmoil Terry is undergoing. A little better was the use of that one photo of Luca holding a balloon. As Terry went on about it, the photo became subtly smaller and smaller until it seemed to float away into the distance on the phone screen. Again, this was more interesting than impactful but at least it showed them trying.

The piece was written by Chris Goode and directed by Daphne Attias, who co-founded the company with actor O'Donovan. As Terry, he offers an immediate intimacy with the audience, not to mention some wonderful body work as he rolls and crawls and glides around the room at one key moment. But strip away all the toys and the monologue itself is banal. If there were any insights at hand, I was too busy looking at my cell phone to catch them.

Worst of all, the show never even starts to grapple with the question it insistently raises: if you could delete your digital legacy when you die (or a loved one's after they're gone), would you? In the show, that's apparently just a simple yes or no answer and Terry makes a choice. But he barely scratches the surface of how he makes his decision or

why.

Isn't there some curating to be done? If every image of a loved one is stored online on their Facebook or Twitter account, would you want to just delete them all? How about choosing the best? How about asking the man's mother if she'd like some or all of those photos to be placed in an online album she can access? Or printing the best in a book you give her? Are there images of your former lover and his new boyfriend? Do you save those? Do you reach out to the lover? If you're the only person with control over all these potential memories, isn't it important to think about everyone else? And what does it mean to save a static Facebook page? Do you really just want it sitting there? If the person who died only had four Twitter posts (like Terry does), why then it's not much of a decision. Get rid of it. Since Luca had tens of thousands of Twitter posts, you've got some thinking to do. Are they just boring images of the meal he's eating? Or is there a thread, a celebration of the life he led or the causes he championed or the friends he had that are reflected by those posts? Then you get to the dating apps (be they Grindr or OKCupid) and a whole other host of ethical questions arise. And hey, does the loved one who just died have online friends you knew nothing about? How much of our life are we leading online? Is it meaningless or does it have substance and import and matter?

As you can see from above, overseeing the social accounts of some who died raises a host of practical and philosophical questions. In dealing with them, we should learn more about Luca while Terry would perhaps reveal more about himself, what Luca means to him and how Terry views this life. Instead, Terry makes his choice and that's it, beyond a quick aphorism. What does this decision mean to him? We don't know. And the bells and whistles of technology can't distract us from realizing that.

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The Sound Inside \*\*\* (great cast, clumsy ending)

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