

Check into these hotel theatres

Stage adventurers call hip inns home



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Theatre

Nowadays, Torontonians are looking for love, laughs and theatre... in all the wrong places.

If you're in the market for a unique encounter, a night of hilarity, or some cutting-edge drama, you'd best be advised to abandon your usual haunts and head off to a pair of once shabby, now fabby lodgings on Queen St. W.

The Gladstone Hotel (1214 Queen St. W.) has been the home since later February to the amazingly successful production of Stephen Belber's *Tape* and this week, Kathe Izzo's provocative interpersonal exercise called *Lost* joins the mix.

Down the block at The Drake Hotel (1150 Queen St. W.), comedy will be king starting next Monday when the all-star group "Dazed In Our Lives" begins its improvised soap opera, *Drake '55*.

Now, I realize that performing arts groups utilizing alternative venues isn't exactly new to the city. In recent years, The Great Hall was home to *Romeo and Juliet Remixed* and the Tranzac Club found sellout crowds for its production of *Evil Dead - the Musical*.

But there's something particularly attractive about this recent mingling of old hotels with new artists. The juxtaposition of public and private rooms inside a hotel — as well as the renovated interiors contrasting with the vintage facades — neatly mirrors the off-centre dynamic that these three productions are striving for.

It's just the kind of thing that Jane Jacobs was speaking of when she cited diversity as one of the primary ingredients that made a city stay alive.

Let's look at the trio of shows that have checked into this particular pair of hotels.

Tape is the surprise success of this winter's theatre season. When it opened two months ago with no advance hype, none of us knew what to expect.

The idea that a play set in a hotel room was actually being staged in a hotel room seemed so obvious that most of us thought it couldn't possibly yield anything new. Boy, were we wrong.

From the minute you walk through the Gladstone's lobby,



A room on the second floor of the Gladstone Hotel is the setting for the play *Tape*, being performed by Chris Reynolds, Kate Meehan and John Gordon.

which features a front desk like the ones you've seen in every B-movie from the 1940s, you know you're in for something different.

You climb up a flight of well-worn stairs that generations of pleasure-seekers have trod before you, and wind up at Room No. 64. It's not a pretty sight — peeling walls, garbage-strewn floor and grunge you can almost smell.

Sixteen of you crowd in and sit on benches. Then the play begins and it's really a case of being in the right place at the right time.

Belber's script is an tense affair that could have been retitled *Sex, Lies and Audiotape*, about past crimes coming to light, thanks to a surreptitious tape recording.

A trio of committed young actors — Kate Meehan, Chris Reynolds and John Gordon — do a fine job and the show actually gains from having the audience so close.

Afterwards you can take advantage of the Gladstone's refreshment facilities downstairs or venture out into a neighbourhood where life may very easily imitate art.

Tape is planning to keep running as long as an audience is interested in attending, but don't wait around forever assuming it's always going to be there. Call 647-273-2435 for tickets and details.

Moving around is also the key to the next item on our agenda.

Lost, which starts in Toronto today, is the latest brainchild of conceptual artist Kathe Izzo, who works through the Miami-based interdisciplinary arts group named Artemis. She's best known in America for her "True Love Project."

In that controversial exercise, Izzo meets with people that she "pledges to fall freely in love with." Even after speaking to Izzo on the phone, it's hard to pinpoint exactly what form this can take.

"I'm engaged and interested psychologically with my subjects" is how she describes her attitude to the people who contact her through her Web site (www.trueloveproject.com) and although she admits that she "has a pretty finely tuned radar" and goes out of her way to "avoid lecherous straight men," she still concedes that "the physical can definitely be part of the process."

Most of the stories she relates are of meaningful contact at an art gallery, or serious conversations over coffee — an instant version of all those relationships you may recall from college.

So how does *Lost* differ? "I guess you could call it 'The True Love Project Lite,' if you wanted to," she jokes, "in that it all takes place over a much shorter period of time, 1 to 4 hours, usually."

It also sounds a bit like a hu-

man scavenger hunt, with Izzo and her subject making contact at a given place by cellphone and then finding each other through a series of clues.

"The idea is that you go from feeling lost to being found and the emotions that it can unleash are powerful ones. Deep, but not heavy."

Izzo almost sensed my incredulity because she broke the silence with a liberatingly earthy laugh.

"Look, I'm hardly a New Age person. I'm loud-mouthed and chaotic and Italian. But there's something about this exercise that draws people, especially the adventurous."

If you're feeling adventurous and would like to get *Lost* in Toronto with Kathe Izzo (Bill Murray and Scarlett Johansson need not apply), you can phone her at 1-305-324-0585 or e-mail her: info@trueloveproject.com.

The Gladstone Hotel is Izzo's base of operations while in Toronto and if you'd like to experience her up-close, but not necessarily personal, you can venture to the hotel ballroom on Wednesday night at 8 p.m. where she'll be reading from her poetry as part of the latest launch for *Broken Pencil*, the journal of "zine culture and the independent arts."

If all of that meaningful contact has you in need of some comic relief, then switch your hotel allegiance to The Drake.

This seriously renovated former dive is currently causing lots of buzz for the crowd its wining and dining facilities are attracting.

But entertainment is also part of the package, in their multi-purpose space called The Underground. That's where *Drake '55* begins performances next Monday at 9 p.m.

The group in charge calls itself "Dazed With Our Lives" and they're made up of eight veterans of improv and sketch comedy from around the world, including longtime Toronto faves Janet Van De Graaff and Lisa Merchant.

The premise is that they're in the Drake Hotel in 1955 where "bush pilots mingle with CPR tycoons and beat poets clean dirty laundry."

It's all improvised, it's all original, and if you think it isn't funny, you don't have to pay.

That's right. They're going with a "pay what you think the show is worth" policy, where you enter for free and contribute at the end of the evening depending on how successful you thought the entertainment was.

There you have it: three decidedly different ways to spend an evening. So the next time someone tells you that there's nothing to do in this town, just look them in the eye and start to whistle "There's A Small Hotel."

If they're hip, they'll know precisely what you're talking about.

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