DALLAS Observer

Cross into Death's Seductive Abyss, With (w)HOLE by Dead White Zombies

By Jamie Laughlin Fri., Dec. 7 2012 at 3:02 PM

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Whether the matter is one of love or art, giving in fully requires trust. If that union isn't present, we allow only the brashest, most peripheral pieces of ourselves to mingle, while protecting the endangered ones. Those sparse pockets of emotional greenspace that we hold close are precious -- they can't and shouldn't be handed over easily. We need to feel safe to go all the way.

(w)HOLE, the theater/performance art/installation project currently converting a West Dallas warehouse into purgatory's playland, predicts that about human

nature. It emboldens us for complete immersion by derobing our timidity, right from the start. And it does it with a gentle touch and a small, protective stone.

Orchestrated by Dead White Zombies in a 36,000 square foot warehouse on generous loan by Trinity Groves, (w)HOLE is a sort-of love story set on postmortem repeat. It's a funneling of ideas, philosophy and original letters, staged around desperate wanting, then channeled through a theater's surrogates.

If you ask its creator, UTD Prof Thomas Riccio, about the central concept, he would say it's grounded in Hindu cosmology and follows a pair of spirits as they travel through time and space. But that would be a generously simplified summary. And here's one that's even more so: It's a Choose Your Own Adventure with death.

The waiting room for (w)HOLE is a small, with limited seating. It feels like the counselor'scramped lobby in *Beetlejuice*. Voices pipe in faintly from a tiny transistor, softly foreshadowing the pending crossover. Then, it's time. We enter.

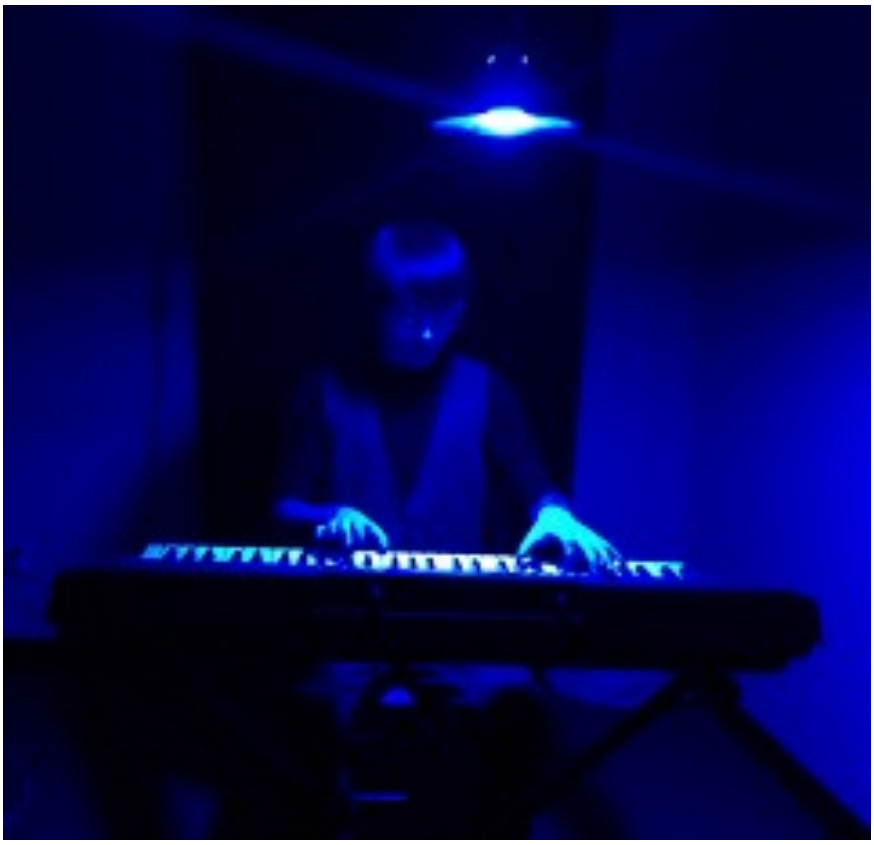
A comforting medium sits center stage, in a room matching the size and visual appeal of a third-rate shoe store's back office. As a group, we fill in the sphere around her.

She welcomes us on our return -- It seems we've been here before -- and extends herself to each of us individually through touch, warmth and generous eye contact. She shares her protective treasures, small stones stacked in a bowl, making sure that each goes to its proper owner. They're meant to guide and ground us into this tale and by the time our session has concluded, she's won us over with her tenderness. The tone shifts. We participate, from this point on, using every piece of our being.

We travel on.

Our subjects, the lovers, are posed under separate spotlights. She is tethered, both literally and figuratively to her geography. He must take another path. They will reunite, she says. He says. But destiny, it seems, disagrees.

Scenes spark around us like a long tail of igniting firecrackers. Another room is illuminated. Next, a vignette. Soon all are available for exploration. The twisting paths feel like the unfathomable tunneling of memory storage, but the lives we're moving through are not our own. Even the sound, while anchored scene by scene, bleeds gently into the next. We're fumbling into another's databank, threading together the experiences as we travel.



In the back of the house, a 14-year-old boy plays Journey romanthems on a keyboard, wrapped in a glowing blue light. In the center, Riccio's own childhood film reel whirls, showing unifying events like birthday parties and holidays. All the while the central characters shift roles, times, genders, ages and locations in search of a new ending. In search of completeness.

We interact with the characters -- up to a point. Riccio later tells me that the show is 90 percent scripted (all words, letters and nested tales were written by him) and only ten percent improvised. It feels impossible, since we've spent the evening communicating with these characters. We've danced with them. We've touched them. We've even asked them questions. And there it is: the true brilliance of the experience -- it's as much a look at ourselves as it is of this couple.

With our free will we act predictably, allowing a determined series of events to run their course. This situation will continue -- over, and over, and over -- because it was never meant to be completed, not in this life or any other. And despite our 36,000 square foot journey through corridors, ripped curtains and 80's melodic rock ballads, we will end in the same place at the same time.

The only way it wouldn't happen is by venturing out. By leaving this lusty, tortured world and going rogue. By discarding your stone, exiting the building and driving away.

But who in history would want to do that? Especially when complete immersion feels so good.

(w)HOLE runs Thursday through Saturday nights until December 22. Tickets cost $15 and beer and wine is available on donation. Enter death's waiting room at 8 p.m. The warehouse sits at 500 Singleton Boulevard.