

# EMISFÉRICA

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## ***home/sick***

Sarah Lucie | New York University

*home/sick*, Written and performed by The Assembly. Directed by Jess Chayes. The Living Theater. New York, NY. 4 November 2012.



Left to right: Kate Benson, Luke Harlan, and Ben Beckley in *home/sick*.

Photo: The Assembly. Living Theater, New York, NY. November 7 2012.

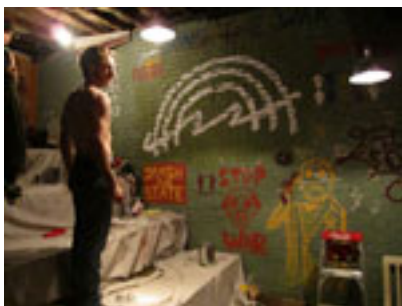
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“Your brain is a bomb,” and this is precisely what The Assembly hopes to ignite in their production of *home/sick*. This ensemble-based play, devised, researched, and written by a collective of multi-disciplinary performance artists, has taken up the revolutionary cause of the Weather Underground. Rather than speaking through the violence promoted by the rebel group, The Assembly works in a peaceable manner, honoring, yet simultaneously providing a nuanced critique of the Weather Underground’s tactics.

The Weather Underground was a radical left group, initially known as the Weathermen, formed as a violent offshoot of Students for a Democratic Society in 1969. The group aimed to create a clandestine revolutionary party for the overthrow of the US government in support of a new classless society. Often labeled as a terrorist group, the Weathermen embraced violent tactics that included public riots and bombings, and they even issued a “Declaration of a State of War” against the US government. Yet the group believed their violence was necessary in battling the equally atrocious violence of non-action.

*home/sick* functions as part history lesson, with a largely historically accurate plot and characters inspired by real members of the Weather Underground. Beginning with a speech that drew in new members at Columbia University, the production then follows the group’s growth through their most famous riots, “Days of Rage,” after which they were forced to go underground. As the members grow inextricably linked to each other, both emotionally and physically, the stakes are raised. Bombs are built at an alarmingly fast rate and dropped even faster in a staged montage veering on chaos. Emotions hit an all-time high after the Greenwich Village townhouse explosion, when a pin bomb went off as it was being constructed. Fear sets in, making the group reckless. Finally, the production highlights the Brinks robbery in 1981, when their ideals were breached as three members of the group robbed a Brinks armored truck and killed two police officers and a security guard in the process. With a few members in jail, and the others losing steam in the face of a seemingly endless battle, the Weather Underground ultimately disintegrates.



Luke Harlan in *home/sick*

Photo: The Assembly. Living Theater, New York, NY. November 7 2012.

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What The Assembly's interpretation highlights, however, is the human nature of these insurgents. They are practicing a revolutionary lifestyle, overthrowing normative behavior as forcefully as they seek to overthrow the government. Ultimately each member of the group succumbs to the call of more traditional society. Jealousy, ambition, and an ultimate need for independence tears the group apart more effectively than any government action. The revolutionary group could not survive when feeding off of passion alone. The group's vulnerability is mirrored in the temporary aesthetic of the production's design. The audience is seated on mismatched chairs or makeshift risers, as if attending a last-minute rally. Flyers litter the space, and chalk and stenciled paint drawings, some of which the actors draw through the course of the show, decorate the concrete walls. Nothing is finished, and nothing is permanent.

While The Assembly provides historical accuracy, they also make clear that the Weather Underground's revolution is ongoing. In a Brechtian turn, each actor steps out of their character to address the audience directly as a modern citizen. In one monologue, Emily Louise Perkins provides a starkly honest account of her experience of white privilege in New York City today, noting the Mexicans working as bussers while she slides into a higher paying waiter job at a restaurant. In another monologue, Luke Harlan recounts his visit to the Vietnam tunnels, a truth that is now exoticized as a piece of the distant past, although it is a daily present for those living in Vietnam. These monologues call upon the audience to understand the story of the Weather Underground not as a history lesson, but as something that continues to affect us on a daily basis. The play concludes with the reading aloud of the audience's individual thoughts about what their ideal America might look like. In the age of the Occupy movement, it is no surprise that the responses often centered on equality and freedom—more proof of the work still to come.

The Assembly worked as an ensemble, just as the Weather Underground aimed to do, involving every member in the process and highlighting each ensemble member's unique voice. Yet, they make inherent changes to the Weather Underground's effort by working through entirely nonviolent means. As the production highlights, the chaos that accompanies violence was one aspect that tore the group apart. But a peaceful, reasonable theatrical means to the same end may be more sustainable. A brain is a bomb that can't be extinguished, but one that grows and develops in perpetuity.

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Sarah Lucie has an MA from the Department of Performance Studies at New York University where she focuses on experimental and immersive theater, simulation and virtual reality, and vibrant materialism in the context of performance. She is also a theater critic for *Show Business Magazine* and is currently the Editorial Assistant of *TDR: The Journal of Performance Studies*.

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