

# The garden stage

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## ABSTRACT

On my visit to the Public Garden, the busker singing on the bridge, the fuzzy ducklings swimming in the pond behind their mother, and the blocky aging bruiser with a chin beard and his goateed adult son who walked past with an identical hitch in their strides all seemed to participate in Leddy's exploration of family, art, and nature.

## FULL TEXT

RECENTLY I attended a play in the Public Garden, but it looked as though I was taking some kind of audio tour - and in a sense, I was. I was one of several people carrying laminated green maps and wearing headphones attached to mp3 players, moving through the park singly or in small groups. We were the audience of David Leddy's "Susurrus." The map guided me from point to point while I listened to four voices tell stories, divided into acts keyed to specific locations in the park, about an unhappy family headed by an opera singer who brought joy to his public but was a monster in private. "Susurrus," brought to Boston by ArtsEmerson, has already had critically acclaimed runs in botanical gardens in Glasgow and Dresden and will move on to parks in Swansea, Wales; Sao Paulo, Brazil; and Santiago, Chile.

Such an experimental approach to theater, using contemporary technology to free the action from the stage and the audience from its seats, might seem avant garde at first, and Leddy does have a reputation as a fearless innovator. But these days there's nothing more mundane than the experience of moving through the city while attending to an electronically delivered text - whether in the form of a song, audiobook, play, lecture, sermon, podcast, e-mail, text message, GPS directions, or tour spiel. This experience is part of many people's daily commute, and when I run through the Public Garden early on weekend mornings, I'm usually both taking in the scenery and lost in a story. The old expression would say that I've got my head deep in a book, but it's the reverse: the book is being piped into my head.

The text of "Susurrus," an extended riff on Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," remains the same wherever it is performed, but the lines take on fresh import in each location. On my visit to the Public Garden, the busker singing on the bridge, the fuzzy ducklings swimming in the pond behind their mother, and the blocky aging bruiser with a chin beard and his goateed adult son who walked past with an identical hitch in their strides all seemed to participate in Leddy's exploration of family, art, and nature.

Perhaps the eeriest resonances arose at the Ether Monument, erected "to commemorate the discovery that the inhaling of ether causes insensibility to pain, first proved to the world at the Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston." The play's all about pain - its persistence as well as the characters' attempts to escape it, soothe it, live with it - and the story's awful (and a little gratuitous) revelations of child abuse give a sinister cast to the idealized figure of the Good Samaritan that surmounts the monument: an older man holding a suffering younger man in his arms.

"Susurrus" uses the elegant old Public Garden and the template of Shakespeare's woodland tale of desire to juxtapose two contrary traditions in understanding the relationship between nature and the city. One, associated with Frederick Law Olmsted, the great American landscape designer who was instrumental in creating Boston's Emerald Necklace, treats nature as a balm, an antidote for the harsh realities of modern industrial urban life. You come to the park for recreation in an almost literal sense, as a retreat from the artificiality and alienation of the metropolis.

The opposing vision regards nature as the savagery that moves beneath the veneer of civilization, a savagery evident in the "predators" we are taught to fear in public space, especially in inner city parks after dark. That savagery is expressed in the desires of the play's cosmopolitan ogre of a father; his damaged son, like so many city dwellers, seeks peace and healing in green public space.

"Susurrus," which runs through June 5, tells these old stories in a new way that allows the park and the play to deepen each others' meanings. Other artists, inspired by Leddy's model and Boston's wealth of potential settings, should try their hand at telling other sorts of iPod stories keyed to the cityscape. The form seems perfectly suited to the way we live now.

Carlo Rotella is director of American studies at Boston College. His column appears regularly in the Globe.

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### Illustration

Caption: istockphoto/ the boston globe; h.hopp-bruce/ globe staff

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