

If the venue fits, wear it!

Quality; London boutique hosts shoe-savvy Canadian play

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LONDON - On upscale Marylebone Lane, a crowd of Londoners has gathered around Tracey Neuls' shoe boutique. Peering in the windows past the display of chic but comfortable footwear, they are observing two female employees in the middle of a passionate debate over whether they should launch a cut-rate line and make millions, or keep things the way they are and preserve the quality and exclusivity of the brand. Listening closely, the gawkers can hear words filter out into the late summer evening air: "Sales ? sex ? toe cleavage ..."

While the Italian leather on display in the window is real, the argument is staged. The passersby have stumbled upon *Quality*, a site-specific play about women, footwear and selling your sole for success that's currently stopping (pedestrian) traffic in this fashionable shopping district. Watched by 30 prosecco-sipping audience members crammed into the living-room sized shop and glimpsed by many more passing strangers every night, *Quality* is also a hyper-Canadian production -- written by Vancouver's Elaine Avila, directed by University of Alberta professor Kathleen Weiss and starring Edmonton's Tracy Penner and Melissa Thingelstad.

Yes, even the cherry-red high heels are from the Great White North: Canadian designer Neuls' TN_29 winter collection has a prominent -- one might say starring-- role in *Quality*, standing in for the fictional but equally high-end "Tremenulos" of the play.

Relaxing in an old pair of orange runners after the show is over and the indoor and outdoor audiences have shuffled away, co-star Penner, 28, explains how the play mixes treads with treading the boards. "It's two kinds of art forms coming together to help promote each other," says the Manitoba-born actress, whose character Pippa has the ability to channel the personality of pumps and platforms.

Lest you scoff at the idea of shoes as an art form -- though few female readers will -- know that Neuls has received awards from the Royal Society of Art and shown her work at the Barcelona Museum of Modern Art. At her cozy corner boutique in London, her eponymous shoes hang from the ceiling like paintings or sit on vintage stools like sculpture. "It certainly does set the stage really well for the argument of the play," says 26-year-old Thingelstad, originally from Saskatchewan, whose haughty character Roxanne feels she must protect the Tremenule name from Pippa's populist ambitions.

Coinciding with London Fashion Week, *Quality* deals with the whys and wherefores of what drives your average Jimmy Choo enthusiast. As Pippa

and Roxanne serve their fur-clad customers, the many reasons a woman who didn't live in a shoe would spend the equivalent of a down payment for a pair are explored: fashion, status, sex, even revenge.

Penner and Thingelstad first slipped into these two characters' shoes in June at a Gravity Pope store in Edmonton. There, surrounded by hundreds of brands of shoes, Pippa's argument for the democratization of style had a bit of an edge. In the elegant surroundings of Tracey Neuls shop in London, however, where the shoes are brought out in boxes that open like secret compartments in a jewellery box (and priced well out of the budget of independent actors from Edmonton), Roxanne's argument has the advantage. In fact, after seeing a preview in London, the playwright strengthened Pippa's lines to rebalance the show.

Penner agrees with her character that a woman's choice of moccasin says a lot more about her than just about what she wears to protect her feet from the street. "I feel like a totally different person depending on what shoes I'm wearing," says the actress, whose favourite footwear is a pair of black Fluevog boots.

When Thingelstad first read the script, however, she wondered if perhaps Quality was overstating things here and there. In particular, she was uncertain about what the actresses call the "orgasm scene," wherein Pippa and Roxanne roll around in ecstasy as they get the first glimpse of Tremendulo's new collection. But when rehearsals moved into Gravity Pope, Thingelstad learned that she too was capable of going weak at the knees for a nice pair of thigh-high boots. "I walked in," she recalls, "and saw this shoe and went ? [Here Thingelstad lets out her orgasmic noise followed by a shuddering sound that is difficult to render as onomatopoeia, at least in a family newspaper]?literally, that came out of my mouth." She laughs. "Shoes are art."

And Quality has become a bit of an art installation itself. Penner and Thingelstad are thrilled by the excitement added to the play by the second audience -- the passersby who stop and laugh, or snap pictures on their cellphones. (At Gravity Pope, the production was not visible from the street.) Sometimes they literally become part of the show. "Are you still open?" one woman asked innocently, the other day, walking in on the middle of a scene.

Tonight, two men stopped Penner as her character Pippa left the show to take her low-cost shoe designs to Los Angeles. "They were just fascinated by it," says Penner, who offered them a flyer and told them to come back. "One said, 'Do you do Christmas parties?' I said, 'I'm from Canada.' He said, 'I don't care where you're from.' "

Well, perhaps they'll just have to come back to London, then. There's no business like shoe business, right? - Quality continues at Tracey Neuls Shoe Boutique in London, England, until Sept. 23. Visitwww.qualitytheplay.co.uk for details.

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