

## Psychoanalysis as Chamber Drama: A Night at Artists Space by Liby Hays



Erika Landström, *HOTEL ECHO LIMA PAPA*, 2026. Performance view, Artists Space, New York, March 15, 2026. Tess Sahara. Photo: Liby Hays.

Since my days of auditioning, I have never held monologues in high regard. Stuck awkwardly between thought and speech, the monologue closely approximates neither. The monologist, Yorrick's skull clutched firmly in hand, embodies theatricality at its cringiest, renouncing both naturalism and entertainment. But on a recent Sunday evening at Artists Space, *Dialogue Monologue*, a presentation of two work-in-progress plays, found new resonance in the device's paradoxical temporality—breaking away from the flow of diegetic time to reflect a crisis of the present.



Cassandra Seltman and Eleanor Ivory Weber, *Diagnosis*, 2026. Performance view, Artists Space, New York, March 15, 2026. Photo: Liby Hays.

Upon entering, we, the audience, were handed juice boxes—a nostalgic treat for an otherwise grown-up event. The first reading was of *Diagnosis*, by psychoanalyst Cassandra Seltman and artist Eleanor Ivory Weber. “Say why you’re on your ship,” one actor began, sitting in a folding chair across from another actor in a folding chair. “You just want to go to sea—you’re looking for a berth,” his counterpart said, adding, “What’s wrong with where you were?” The two continued to trade leading questions, pigeonholing one another (as seaman, as spy, as violent drunkard) until it became apparent that they were not individuals but the bicameral splintering of a single consciousness. As if to illustrate a failure of synthesis, the speakers shared glimmers of folk wisdom in strangely amalgamated forms: “You hit the nail on the nose.” It seemed that redemption for this fractured fella could only be found in the pair dutifully setting sail, inspiring an echolalic chorus of “We won’t wait, we won’t wait, we won’t wait.” Maybe the juice boxes are meant to prevent scurvy?

The title of the evening’s second play, the artist Erika Landström’s *HOTEL ECHO LIMA PAPA*, spells out HELP in the NATO phonetic alphabet for communicating via aviation radio. At the top of the one-woman performance, the captivating Tess Sahara pounced into a feline crouch atop a minimal-looking white table. She wore nothing but a white button-down, like the one Mitski embraced as a symbol of defensive put-togetherness. Sahara teetered into a one-legged “airplane” stretch, then surveyed the room from all angles as if gathering her thoughts. “There really is nothing inside of me that needs to come out,” she announced, frankly. “If something has to come from me, it would be a memory. . . . A substance that is different each time.” Perhaps this “something” was the recited text itself; perhaps it was the affectively charged memories Method actors draw upon in their work. If the problem in *Diagnosis* was dialectical—a split consciousness giving way to an impossibly homogenous subject—the tension here was tripartite, located in the emotionally costly exchanges between text, actor, and audience.



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Weaving between metaphors, Sahara’s character likened memory to objects—weighty and enduring, yet superficially mutable. Holiday paraphernalia became symbols of dissociation; a spirit slipped out, uncoagulated, like the yolk of an Easter egg or shiny Christmas ornaments not reflecting back. The actress pantomimed pinpricks, stings, and other sources of pain. (Wittgenstein famously theorized pain as something observable and socially conveyed, rather than a private, inaccessible state.) Most disarming was the self-interruption of her own existentialist musings with urgent airplane announcements: “Rapid decompression, I repeat, rapid decompression.” Just as planes condense time-space, the character was able “to reverse time, to un waste, to compensate, to reinvent, to reinvest.” Her final provocation referred to the monologue form directly, affirming it a site where this freedom might be located: “You never dared ask for the difference between thinking and speaking.” Should we have asked? Should we have thought to ask or asked by thinking?

The ceremonious yet suffocating quality of the monologue feels crucial to these plays, to these speakers. For them, identity is fugitive and time is pliable. Yet, somehow, the present still creates an impasse—the open-ended moment when, paradoxically, our courage has always already failed us.