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## Fringe Festival 2008 Reviews!

***Mourn the Living Hector, Ariel View, Keep Your Eyes Open, and more***

**By Various**

published: August 12, 2008

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photo by Dixie Sheridan



Krapp, 39

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by Trav S.D.

*Mourn the Living Hector* (CSV)—Paul Cohen's mashup of the Trojan War and the plight of veterans today—establishes its grip immediately with two potent scenes. The explosive opening only begins to explain why Mike (Jeff Clarke, who doubles as Hector), a Marine returned presumably from the Middle East, has woken up in a bed soaked with blood. The play then cuts to a somber discussion between Hector and his lieutenant Polydamus (David Skeist), whose ominous reflections are punctuated by a persistent cough.

Performance Lab 115's young cast brings Cohen's enigmatic, witty, and emotionally charged script beautifully to life. Birgit Huppuch gives a riveting performance as Hecuba, scary in her self-control, while the closing, doom-haunted dialogue between Clarke and Rebecca Lingafelter

as Andromache achieves a somber poetry. The contemporary plot feels at times a little forced, one of the risks of competing against Homer. But this fine production, like the best works of Charles Mee, demonstrates the continuing relevance of ancient stories to our own contemporary tragedies. JOHN BEER

***Ariel View***

“You do not do, you do not do,” Sylvia Plath writes at the opening of her exuberantly tasteless poem “Daddy.” The creators and ensemble of *Ariel View* (45 Bleecker Theaters) a tepid examination of Plath’s life and work in a series of sketches, do not do much of anything with their brilliant, ferocious subject.

During the course of the piece, we learn that manic depression often correlates with unusual creativity; that confessional poetry begat language poetry which begat the Beats; and, over and over and over, that academics and journalists and Plath’s family members all wanted to dictate how her life should be understood. It’s like watching *Plath: The Wikipedia Entry* as directed by Janet Malcolm.

Did I mention there’s a dance sequence set to a recording of Plath reading her monumental “Lady Lazarus”? During which the dancers express the poet’s delicate state of mind by, well, freaking out? This is actually a high point: Plath’s voice and words provide a vitality and drama sorely needed elsewhere. JOHN BEER

### ***Keep Your Eyes Open***

All the 11-year-old girls starring in *Keep Your Eyes Open* (Cherry Lane Theatre) know the “Soulja Boy” lyrics and the accompanying dance. And judging by these ladies’ canny looks of disapproval, it seems they know exactly what Soulja is saying about that ho. These girls are barely a decade old, and it’s soul-crushing to be reminded that the full burden of Hilton-Richie-Spears-dom is being allowed to fall on their tiny shoulders. But the kids are coping well, and they’ve pulled an energetic show about female preadolescent hell from their own small wells of angst.

Based on workshops the girls did with the PossEble Theater Company, *Keep Your Eyes Open* comprises a string of scenes and reflections from girl-world, all emceed by the young Winnifred (Winnifred BonJean-Alpart, who performs better than many adults at Fringe). The plot (the kids become less fretful, more feminist) is as thin as an Olsen, and the girls would be well-served by some mics, but the sparkling young ones provide frequent moments of sheer, hilarious glee (Winnifred declaims “Soulja Boy,” beat-poet-style). The girls vent about chauvinistic gym teachers, fickle friends, climate change, Disney’s “subliminal bullying,” and the dearth of women in their history curriculum. Though we’ve heard it all before, it’s heartening to see the sincerity flashing in those 11 pairs of doe-eyes. RUTH McCANN

### ***Anaïs Nin Goes to Hell***

Why a male playwright would choose to write a staunchly feminist play about dead women mooning through a vaguely polytheistic afterlife defies comprehension, but thank the gods for David Stallings’s *Anaïs Nin Goes to Hell* (the Connelly Theater). With Stallings’s well-paced script, Cristina Alicea’s subtle direction, and a compulsively watchable cast, this thoughtful two-act is a uniquely polished presence at the Fringe.

On a deserted rock just a few knots away from the Island of Karen Carpenter, five long-dead broads—Queen Victoria, Cleopatra, Andromeda, Joan of Arc, and the medieval abbess Heloise—wait mulishly for their beloved men (Joan is keeping a candle burning for our Lord, yelping, “I am ze sword of ze baby Jesus!”). But the women’s hopeless vigil is interrupted by the arrival of infamous French feminist,

diarist, and erotica-writer Anaïs Nin, who immediately pops a lithium tablet into Joan's gaping mouth.

Sounding like a Gallic Madeline Kahn, the svelte Nin (Shelly Feldman) delivers blow after coy blow to her companions' much-cherished delusions, asserting that women can only think clearly when they're completely man-free. Reductive it might be, but *Nin* redeems itself with moments of joyful whimsy: When Heloise, Andromeda, and Queen Vic belt the Carpenters' "Superstar" in three-part harmony, all philosophical gaps are forgiven. RUTH McCANN

### ***Good Pictures***

Just as one measure of the ability of a pop singer is if they can do it "unplugged," a trusty test of directors, playwrights, and actors is whether they can handle the "two guys in a room" play. Such two-handers are the theatrical equivalent of working without a net—no shifts in space to avoid knotty story problems; no butlers to walk on to announce that the inspector is at the door.

Ashlin Halfnight's *Good Pictures* (the Studio at Cherry Lane) is such a vehicle. Set in a small-town jail cell in the aftermath of a guard's murder, the play keeps us in lockdown for 90 minutes in the company of a mismatched, volatile pair of criminals (William Jackson Harper and James Nugent). One of the strengths of Halfnight's script is that he manages to wring tension not only from the nail-biting situation (as the inmates wait all night for the inevitable arrival of the relief guards), but also from the mystery of who these men really are. Halfnight doles out this information piecemeal over the course of the play. In time, we learn that neither man is as good nor as bad as any single detail about their lives would make them appear.

Director Dominic D'Andrea keeps a tight rein on his actors—the pace is natural and unhurried without dropping the energy for the most part. Harper and Nugent both manage to be simultaneously sympathetic and scary. From time to time, they even manage to be funny, even if it is gallows humor. This tight little production is a nice illustration of what can be accomplished with a few simple ingredients. TRAV S.D.

### ***The Seven Little Foys***

As a hard-core vaudeville fan, I regret to report that Chip Deffaa's new musical *The Seven Little Foys* (Schimmel Center) is for old-school show-biz buffs only—and indiscriminating ones, at that. The story of vaudeville's most popular kiddie act, created (in every sense of the word) by song and dance man Eddie Foy, this is a yarn with the potential to educate and tug the heartstrings, even as it amuses.

Unfortunately, the new show fails on all of those levels. The little action the book contains seems copiously plundered from the 1955 Bob Hope film of the same name, including that movie's many gross inaccuracies. The rest of the script is padded with reams of often irrelevant facts, presented without subtlety or integration. And then there are the songs—all 46 of them. Five of these are by Mr. Deffaa and seem like the beginnings of an original musical score. The remainder are period songs—eight of which are from the wrong period.

As old man Foy, Michael Townsend Wright, a former stooge with the likes of Joey Faye and Uncle Floyd Vivino, brings with him a certain authenticity, if not an ability to act. The show's one saving

grace (and a truly magical surprise it is) is the presence of Eddie Foy's great-grandson Ryan Foy in the cast as George M. Cohan. Ryan clearly has both the family bug and the family talent. He lights up the stage whenever he appears, even as Wright appears to be under heavy sedation. TRAV S.D.

### ***La Vigilia (The Vigil)***

There are shipwrights, wheelwrights...and playwrights. Vincent Marano forges plays with a woodworker's old-fashioned sense of craftsmanship. *La Vigilia (The Vigil)*—his tale of postwar Italy, playing at the Connelly Theater—mixes the seemingly incongruous elements of commedia del'arte and Italian neo-realism to produce a hybrid that, while not completely successful, is deserving of further exploration.

James Michael Armstrong plays an urbane, philosophical drifter named Sagesto, who masquerades as the long-lost husband of wealthy widow La Signora (Victoria Bundonis). In this effort he's egged on by various servants and other characters, all of whom have designs of their own.

The production's main problem is tone. While the plot is farcical in structure, broad comedy occurs only in sporadic flashes. And while the entire script is rich with witticism, folk sayings, and clever philosophy, the overall pace is heavy, almost funereal—which may be appropriate for a story about a widow, but clashes mightily with the script's comic aims. To straddle both would require the skills of an Anna Magnani. Bundonis acquits herself well with her character's melancholy aspects, but could do with some of the electricity displayed by Elka Rodriguez as the hotheaded innkeeper Ferra. The creators have built a very good furnace here—they just need to stoke up the fire. TRAV S.D.

### ***Usher***

There may be some inadvertent significance in the fact that the new musical *Usher* (Schimmel Center)—based on Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Fall of the House of Usher"—is the 13th production I've seen in this year's Fringe. At any rate, the number turns out to be lucky—this is far and away the best show I have seen in the festival.

Unlike the manse in Poe's story, *Usher* rests on very solid foundations. As revised by recent Yale grad Molly Fox, this story of a reclusive brother and sister, and the young friend who literally tries to bring light into their lives, would be more accurately described as "inspired by" the famous Poe tale than "based on." At once darker than the source material and unexpectedly funny, Fox's version possesses a Gothic gallows-humor not unlike the cartoons of Charles Addams or Edward Gorey, augmenting a story that already contains a scary mansion, a morbid hypochondriac, a dying woman, and a premature burial, with incest, psycho head-games, and poisoning thrown in for good measure. The result is less oppressive than the original, and arguably more enjoyable.

But it's Sarah Hirsch's music that truly pushes this tale of sublimation into the sublime. Mixing elements of modern pop music with brooding Romantic strains, tinkly vocal trills you might expect to come out of the mouth of Jenny Lind, and silly duets that evoke Gilbert and Sullivan, Hirsch astonishes repeatedly with the creative resources on tap (not the least of which is the ability to pen tunes that are both moody and catchy). Director Becca Wolff and a very solid cast deliver these treats with confidence, care, and gusto—there ain't a turkey in the bunch. They even got the costumes right. That

may be a Fringe first. TRAV S.D.

### ***Krapp, 39***

If *Krapp's Last Tape* is a little white pill of Samuel Beckett's concoction, then Michael Laurence has swallowed it whole. But as we watch Laurence, wracked bodily by the dramatic prescription, it becomes plain that his *Krapp, 39* (Schaeberle Studio Theatre/Pace) is no mere Beckett riff— it's a thoughtful response, a valuable contribution. On his 69th birthday, Beckett's Krapp sits alone, becoming steadily drunk and revisiting tapes from his 30-years-younger self. Disarmed by the Krapp of birthdays past, who shunted love and produced writing of value equal to his name, he struggles to affirm the sad direction his life has taken.

*Krapp, 39* finds Laurence (the writer and sole performer) turning 39, planning to record the monologue Krapp recorded at the same age, in the hopes that he'll live to use it in a production of the Beckett one-act 30 years in the future. As Laurence ponders the imagined performance, he undergoes his own Krapp-like self-investigation: Wielding the same torturous honesty to which Beckett subjected his miserable anti-hero, Laurence videotapes himself in brutal close-up as he unearths old journals, a phone message from his dead mother, and other messy, primary-source evidence of a life about which he's profoundly ambivalent. Using Beckett's play like a fun-house mirror, *39* presents a mesmerizing, distorted vision of Krapp's unwholesome solitude, melded with Laurence's own quirks and failings. With courageous candor and humor, Laurence enters into an eerie communion with *Krapp*, and the resulting work is a thing of startling, wounding beauty. RUTH McCANN

### ***Cycle***

You can't tell what's going on half the time in Rose Courtney's *Cycle* (Spiegelworld), but you don't care. As staged by Craig Carlisle, this refreshingly sweet dream play moves so fast and fascinatingly that you're content to watch, trusting you'll catch up in a minute or two—and you generally do. Courtney plays a nebbishy, bespectacled young lonely-heart named Charlotte, who plans to kill herself if she doesn't achieve success before the sun sets on her birthday. Her salvation comes in the form of a lovable and mysteriously immortal vaudeville troupe: Having uttered the name of the Scottish play, as penance the company has been hurled into the future to help her.

The interplay of this FringeNYC piece's talented sextet—who sing, dance, juggle, scrape a fiddle, and even act Chekhov—calls to mind everything from Pirandello to *The Fantasticks*. Unable to think of any success but the theatrical kind, the troupers thrust themselves before Charlotte in countless guises, prodding her rung-by-rung up the ladder of stardom. In the end, true success proves to be of the “no place like home” variety. In other hands, this journey might have been nauseating. Here, it feels like an inspired, overdue, and rather brave counterweight to a decade of “edge.” TRAV S.D.

### ***Creena Defoouie***

Years after her yodeling sister Mary Annabel met a grisly demise, psychotherapist Creena Defoouie is still looking for “the spoon-shape-headed bastard” who murdered her. But until she finds the culprit, Creena (the lustrous Charlotte Barton-Hoare) is killing time by killing patients at her very own counseling center, Rambey House—“the abode that homes half-wits who lack harmony and hormonal

balance." In her feather-trimmed hot pants, thigh-high boots, and tailcoat, the shrink is a tad unbalanced herself. But if one is possessed of a sufficiently dark perspective on the humorous, it's nigh impossible to resist the perpetually grimacing Creena—that elastic face! Those lipsticked lips! Those thyridic eyes!

Visiting the Fringe Festival from the Isle of Wight, *Creena Defoouie* (Studio at Cherry Lane) is a vampy, pitch-black comedy that revels in the same twisted (but deeply satisfying) British sensibilities that make *Little Britain* and Mitchell and Webb so delightful. Musical numbers penned by costar-director James Hoare are polished and catchy, despite their unusual subject matter: The bucktoothed "nutter" Kenny sings away his dental worries, and Creena belts about her lost love Bertie ("Tell me why, oh, you moved to Ohio!"). Even as Superintendent Hardon (Hoare) comes ever closer to putting Creena behind bars, the piece keeps up its mesmerizing energy, with Creena dancing (and dildo-fighting) her way to the bitter, schizophrenic end. RUTH MCCANN

### ***That Dorothy Parker***

Carol Lempert's thin biographical solo show *That Dorothy Parker* (Soho Playhouse) begins in January of 1943 with the famously quick-witted writer struggling to compose a eulogy for critic and fellow Algonquin Round Table member Alexander Woollcott. Flashing back to their first Algonquin lunch in 1919, Lempert takes us through Parker's literary career—from her work at *The New Yorker* to her stint as a screenwriter in Hollywood to her time in Madrid during the Spanish Civil War—and all the lovers, marriages, suicide attempts, and bottles of Scotch in between.

A capable performer, Lempert deftly vivifies Parker and her many starry friends, including Hemingway and Harold Ross. But though this Fringe Festival piece is touching at times, and Parker's acerbic wisecracks are always funny ("You can lead a horticulture, but you can't make her think"), a better title for the play might have been *Dorothy Parker's Greatest Hits*, as it often feels like Parker's best loved one-liners, poems, and other writings were strung together without any attempt to provide more insight into her life than a Wikipedia entry. Unless you really hate to read, save yourself the time and curl up with *The Portable Dorothy Parker* instead. ANGELA ASHMAN

### ***Behold, the Bowery!***

Among the infinite number of possible historical settings for a work of drama, few would be as colorful or entertaining as New York's Bowery in the mid- to late-19th century. A sound instinct therefore motivates playwright-director Daniel Pfau's maiden effort. This is, after all, the milieu of *The Gangs of New York*. In *Behold the Bowery* (The Connelly Theater), we follow the doings of a cocky actor (Daniel Abeles) and an impecunious Polish immigrant (Alex Coppola), both of whom cross a ruthless Irish gangster (Einar Gunn). The piece feels a lot like one of the melodramas of the era, which were the equivalent of today's TV hackwork (all plot, no reflection). As a theatrical experience, that's not such a bad thing. It's exciting, amusing, and moves along at a good clip.

Still, the production leaves plenty to be desired. The services of a dramaturg are badly needed, for anachronisms and incongruities abound in both the dialogue and the production design. For the most part, the acting is superficial and broad, roughly suited to a college production of *Guys and Dolls*.

When the smoke clears and the villain is duly dispatched, we're given an unexpected coda, a recitation of Whitman's celebratory "I Hear America Singing." After the seedy story that precedes, we hope the epilogue is intended ironically, but we fear it's not. It's one thing to hear the singing, another to fathom the song. TRAV S.D.

### ***I Heart Hamas: And Other Things I'm Afraid to Tell You***

"Cautious" probably isn't the first word you'd associate with a monologue titled *I Heart Hamas* (The Players Loft). But Palestinian-American actor Jennifer Jajeh's hour-long exploration of her life in California and the occupied West Bank rarely reaches the level of provocation suggested by her title. The most engaging section of the piece relates an odd, funny anecdote about a custody battle between Jajeh and a Jewish friend over a cat named Judah; even a cat, she suggests, can be drawn into the Arab-Israeli conflict.

In the American sections, Jajeh's agility as a performer and gift for mimicry are fully displayed. But when the setting shifts to the city of Ramallah during the Second Intifada of the early 2000s, the piece becomes more generic. For a period, Jajeh documented abuses at Israeli checkpoints, standing with a video camera at a distance; much of the second half of her piece seems rooted in a similarly detached perspective. JOHN BEER

### ***Nudists in Love***

The innocence exuded in *Nudists in Love* (45 Bleecker Theatres) engages nearly completely. The musical centers on the scandal that erupts when the people of Gardenia, an almost utopian suburban community, discover that Trevor (Adam J. MacDonald), the upstanding, kind-hearted president of their housing association, is (gasp!) a nudist. Given today's far worse scandals involving politicians much higher up, the Gardenians' shock about Trevor's distaste for clothing at home seems seductively quaint.

Shannon Thomason's satirical book goes further, merrily indicting the fickleness of the electorate: After Trevor is "outed," his neighbors vote Roger (Todd Faulkner), a power-hungry attorney, in as community president. He promptly enacts inane and unpopular restrictions, which make the populace seek Trevor's leadership once more. With an appealing cast (particularly Beth Ann Leone and BJ Hemann as a bickering couple) and Nirmal Chandraratna's buoyant but sometimes awkward score, "Nudists" charms in a goofball sort of way. ANDY PROPST

### ***Zombie***

Given its brutally detailed descriptions of the rape and torture of boys, *Zombie* (Players Theatre Loft) is not for the faint of heart. But Bill Connington's 60-minute adaption of Joyce Carol Oates's 1995 novella of the same name certainly rewards intrepid theatergoers, delivering a haunting glimpse into the mind of a serial killer.

In addition to adapting, Connington takes center stage in this solo show, playing thirtysomething Quentin P., a man bent on creating an automaton sex slave for himself. Under the sure-handed direction of Thomas Caruso, Connington brings Quentin to life with the chillingly benumbed

demeanor of someone who's overly medicated or, perhaps, coping with a learning disability. As Quentin details his crimes, and some factors that may have contributed to them, this placid, guy-next-door exterior gives way to disturbing flashes of vicious arrogance. Deirdre Broderick's original score and Joel E. Silver's lighting design beautifully underscore this eerie, captivating performance. ANDY PROPST

### ***KNB—The Musical***

It's easy to imagine U.S. servicemen and women looking for any diversion that might serve as a way of coping with being deployed in the Middle East. Naval reservist Christopher Carter Sanderson, who was stationed at Kuwait Naval Base (KNB), chose an interesting option, writing a musical: *KNB* (Schimmel Center), a haphazard and frivolous look at service-life that borrows from everything from operetta to [title of show].

In *KNB*, a boy-meets-girl love story combines with a tale about two Navy petty officers attempting to attract "females" by writing a musical. Another aspect of Sanderson's book details how a second paycheck is the true motivation for reservists. These plots rarely cohere, and Sanderson's tunes seem randomly placed within them. Choreographer Erin Porvaznika follows Sanderson's lead, referencing a variety of choreographers in her dances, often to surreal effect. And though *KNB* might have given Sanderson some respite from the service, it's hardly escapist magic for theatergoers. ANDY PROPST

### ***Dreadful Penny's Exquisite Horrors***

It's a bloody mess in the Deluxe tent at Spiegelworld, where some nattily dressed actors are getting smeared with gore—some of it real, most of it fake (we hope). The lights are barely up when the all-too-aptly-named *Dreadful Penny's Exquisite Horrors* reaches a climax of sorts as a brave lady-magician gets a six-inch needle straight through the forearm. Gosh!

But that's about as exciting as things get. Though it promises "burlesque," *Horrors* isn't so much a cheeky Dita Von Teese number as it is a jolting foray into the big wide world of BDSM. Penny (Jennifer LaTurner) presides as our dominatrix-style MC, a Dr. Frank-N-Furter wannabe who forces her ragtag gang of five to perform an enervated variety show in which the charmingly bumbling magician (still bleeding!) is a fleeting bright spot. But song, striptease, drama, and magic all fall to ghastly pieces as Penny proceeds to administer a hose-beating of the emotions: As Penny cackles and kvetches, a timid man is provoked until he assaults a costar, and a fumbling stripper is reduced to sobs. In the midst of it all, Penny's thong is removed, but don't expect to see anything; much like her conclusions about illicit sensuality, Penny's own exquisite horrors remain obscured. RUTH McCANN

### ***Woodhull***

A shrill, almost universally hated woman runs for president, sticking with the race when even her closest advisors and supporters have long abandoned her. Sound familiar?

Evidently the creators of *Woodhull* (Schimmel Center) hope so, given the former First Lady's bid for the White House earlier this year. Yet, while the efforts of a forceful but basically unlikable personality to get ahead in politics is an excellent theme for a play, it's not the sole the focus of this one. Indeed,



one would be hard-pressed to say just what the play is about. Playwright Liza Lentini offers a sprawl of facts and exposition, events and relationships, and while those elements may add up to the life of 1872 presidential candidate Victoria Woodhull, they do not necessarily add up to a cohesive theatrical experience.

This is a frequent pitfall in biographical playwriting, and Woodhull's complicated, colorful life only increases the temptation to throw everything into the soup. While her presidential candidacy is the ostensible peg of the piece, we also learn that Woodhull was the daughter of a medicine show huckster, a former prostitute, a communist, a suffragette, and an advocate of free love. Her running mate was Frederick Douglas, and she pimped out her sister to Cornelius Vanderbilt. Any one of these details is more than enough to hang a story on. Including them all runs the risk of being, as Woodhull apparently was herself, so overly "interesting" as to be repellant. TRAV S.D.

### ***The Redheaded Man***

Schizophrenic. That's the diagnosis that Brian—the wunderkind architect at the center of Halley Bondy's *The Redheaded Man* (Barrow Street Theater)—has received from psychiatrists. This diagnosis can also be given to Bondy's drama-comedy, which aims for tears with a sad tale of how Brian (an appealing David Jenkins) has never resolved issues about his mother's mysterious death when he was a child. Unfortunately, Bondy undermines Brian's story with broad comedy about Dr. Jonas (played with flair by Michelle Sims), Brian's pill-pushing, self-medicating shrink.

Brian is in therapy because, since his mom's death, he's been continually visited by the Redheaded Man (a likably stalwart Bruce Bluett), who gives Brian glimpses into the inner workings (literally) of those around him. His visions have helped his career, but doomed his social life. Brian's personal failures are a second creepily comic aspect to this promising play, which needs some therapy itself, of the dramaturgical kind. ANDY PROPST

### ***The Alice Complex***

Inspired by the true story of a student who held Germaine Greer hostage in 2002, Peter Barr Nickowitz's crisp, provocative, and darkly humorous play *The Alice Complex* (Cherry Lane Theatre) fictionalizes what happened that day, while smartly examining what it means to be a feminist to different generations of women.

The story, which is presented as a play within a play performed by two "actors" named Margo and Quinn, begins with Rebecca (Xanthe Elbrick) unexpectedly arriving at the home of her professor, Sally (Lisa Banes), insinuating that she's carrying in a box the penis of the man who tried to date-rape her. But when Sally goes to call the police, Rebecca, disappointed that Sally doesn't praise her heroics, ties her up and interrogates her about why she no longer believes in the revolutionary ideas of her seminal book of 1970s feminism, *The Alice Complex*. (In one of the play's creepier scenes, Rebecca licks cake batter off hostage Sally's face while singing the Supremes' "Where Did Our Love Go?".)

Under the taut direction of Bill Oliver, the outstanding actors—Obie winner Banes and Tony Award nominee Elbrick—expertly tackle 11 different roles, which include Margo and Quinn and two women who walk out of the play because the radical Sally reminds one of her own mother. On the contrary, it's

safe to say that rather than walking out of Nickowitz's play, this fascinating work will likely be remembered as one of the best of this year's Fringe. ANGELA ASHMAN

### ***XY(T)***

Kestryl Lowrey's one-man show *XY(T)* (The Player's Loft) features red glitter, a neon pink dildo, and a syringe, but Lowrey's body is his most effective prop. Identifying as transgender-butch, Lowrey has sculpted it with years of testosterone, and the resulting physique is a bundle of unnerving contrasts—Botticellian thighs adjoin hairy calves; ace-banded breasts sit below muscled shoulders. Lowrey has a ghost of a goatee, but his voice lilts girlishly as he insists, "This is the 21st century, and we create our own genders." French performance artist Orlan, famed for her gruesome facial remodelings and philosophy of transformation, would be proud.

The show alights on abstract thought, personal confession, and re-enacted family scenes, as Lowrey grapples bravely with the impossible immensity of his subject matter—his body, his identity, gender at large. The show is earnestly enthusiastic, but it desperately needs a narrower focus and a clearer delineation between the comic and the dramatic: When Lowrey gyrates to a disco beat while sporting a strap-on, is it funny or elegiac? Hard to tell. RUTH McCANN

### ***Julius Caesar***

There's much to admire in the Guerilla Shakespeare Project's lean and hungry production of *Julius Caesar* (CSV Flamboyant Theater). The script has been hewn to bone and sinew with a Roman-like efficiency, down to a tight, streamlined hour and 40 minutes. Shakespeare's three dozen characters are merged into a very busy but solid seven. The three-quarter thrust staging is lively and kinetic, and the actors all make good sense of their speeches (which is rare enough in this reviewer's experience). And the production (as are all those by this company) is gender-balanced, ceding half the traditionally male roles to women, with illuminating results.

This is all to say that careful thought and craftsmanship abound in this production, but it still comes short of nailing it. Modern business dress and a smattering of oil barrels suggest some connection to contemporary world affairs, but the concept is taken no farther. Most sorely missed is the high degree of emotional intensity one would expect from *Friends*, *Romans*, and *Countrymen* when they begin spilling each other's blood, Stoics or not. Still, there's much good work here, and no one need fall on their swords. TRAV S.D.

### ***On Insomnia and Midnight***

Mexico City playwright Edgar Chias has created a chamber piece for two actors with *On Insomnia and Midnight* (Soho Playhouse). Like a *Last Tango in Paris* scripted by Nabokov, the play cryptically retraces the unnerving and erotically charged relationship of an elderly language teacher (Pietro González) and a chambermaid (Sonia Portugal) in a series of vignettes. In language that veers from the vaguely philosophical ("time is nothing more than the name of our failures") to the obscene, Chias charts the teacher's obsession with the young woman's sexual experiences, even as she slowly learns of his possible involvement in another maid's suicide.

LaMicro Theater's spare production of the play suggests the power of Chias's script without quite realizing it. While González develops a nuanced portrait of the predatory teacher, simultaneously creepy and vulnerable, Portugal's stiffly mannered performance chills their interactions, a distancing effect heightened by the overly literal projections that occasionally punctuate the action. JOHN BEER

### ***Love Is Dead***

For a guy who was so dull as a child that his parents divorced him, nebbish-y mortician Orin has remarkable luck with women in adulthood. In *Love Is Dead* (45 Bleecker Theatres), he's pursued not only by the girlfriend of a serial murder victim on whom Orin's performing an autopsy, but also Dana Strand (a delightful Megan Johns), the forensic geneticist who's working with Orin on solving a serial murder case. Oh, and yeah, there's also Jane (the sultry Lyndsay Hailey), another one of the serial killer's victims. She was a major nympho in life, and she maintains her lustiness in death.

Yes, *Love* is a musical about a murder spree and necrophilia, and this ensemble-created piece has a zingy, often hilarious book and a tuneful, if uneven, score. With some judicious cuts, an energy-sapping intermission would disappear, and *Love* could prove to be a musical worth keeping around and resurrecting post-Fringe. ANDY PROPST

### ***The Grecian Formula***

Just as only those of a certain age will get the joke of this play's title, only those with an affectionate, lifelong immersion in the theater and its history will fully appreciate the thousand subsequent jokes in this production. Luckily, this is New York and the Fringe Festival, and there are doubtless innumerable potential fans for *The Grecian Formula*, a Ridiculous Theater-style imagining of the birth of drama in ancient Athens.

In an act of navigation worthy of the Phoenicians, playwright Carter Anne McGowan manages a voyage through the past 2500 years of Western drama, from the slave comedies of Rome to the romantic comedies of Shakespeare to modern musical blockbusters. McGowan pulls off more than one amazing feat here, not the least of which is making us care about the travails of ill-used ghost writer Alidocious (Todd Lawson) in an atmosphere of cheesy and wheezy theater in-jokes. So deft is her hand and so great her apparent love for the art form, that she gives us an entire scene that lampoons theatre *administration*—and in rhyming couplets, no less. Mary Jo Lodge directs the sparkling ensemble with assurance and enthusiasm. Who'd have imagined that tragedy could be so comical? TRAV S.D.

### ***The Pantyhose Grid***

It's a truth universally acknowledged that academics are at their rhetorical best when shitfaced, blotto, and three sheets to the wind. After a shot or three of Scotch, it's only a matter of time before Bill (Tom Martin), hero of *The Pantyhose Grid* (Connelly Theater), finds cause to call stockings "nylon signifiers of erotic desire" and exclaim to his adorable sidekick (Doug Roland): "You will get tenure! You'll never have to work again!"

Playwright Cynthia Frank can't quite master serious academic-speak, but she has an eerie knack for reproducing that intoxicating cocktail of dialectical gold and utter bullshit that spills from liquor-

loosened professorial lips. After a rollicking game of "Which authors in the canon would you like to be sucked by?" (not Woolf), these Columbia profs pour over a long-lost Jane Austen diary, and Austen herself (played with delicious impertinence by Lauren Beth Ferebee) is revealed in flashback form. As Jane chatters, she discloses her much-speculated-upon sexual preferences (she prizes women's "manual dexterity") and conceives of a mind-blowing, pantyhose-based theory of the universe. Though the stocking conceit is as flimsy and pointless as nylons themselves, it's still tremendous fun to watch a philosophizing, snogging Jane who isn't (thank Jesus) Anne Hathaway. RUTH McCANN

### ***Becoming Britney***

The widely reported highs and lows of Britney Spears's life have given people around the world cause for both concern and schadenfreude. Molly Bell and Daya Curley take advantage of the latter emotion in *Becoming Britney* (45 Bleecker Theaters), a retrospective of the pop-tart's life told through a musical-theater parody. What happens when Britney arrives in Manhattan? Cue a comic take on the "NYC" production number from *Annie*. When it's time for Spears (cunningly played by Bell in a hilarious array of wigs and an ill-fitting baldcap) to open up in rehab, she sings "My I Want Song."

For musical theater fans, such references amuse, but they feel out-of-place in the context of Spears's world. The show only succeeds when it takes on Spears at her own level—like when a very pregnant Britney shakes junk. Mirroring Spears's life, *Becoming Britney* is ultimately a sad waste of both talent and a good idea. ANDY PROPST

### ***Blanche Survives Katrina in a FEMA Trailer Named Desire***

A slim joke turns curiously dark in Mark Sam Rosenthal's solo show *Blanche Survives Katrina in a FEMA Trailer Named Desire* (Players Theater), which finds the heroine of *Streetcar Named Desire* rambling through New Orleans following the devastating hurricane of 2005.

Rosenthal, wearing men's streetclothes and speaking in a soft drawl, evokes the character by donning a blonde wig. While Blanche, always looking for magic, recounts her first days in the Big Easy following Katrina's onslaught, we're amused by some of her delusions—the bus driver who takes her to the Superdome is a pirate. But soon a racist edge creeps into her observations, which gives the show an unduly bitter taste.

Rosenthal may mean for her remarks to comment on the federal government's response to the disaster, but there's never a discernable connection, and thus our initial amusement gives way to an attitude often felt by those suffering adversity: patient endurance. ANDY PROPST

### ***The Fabulous Kane Sisters in "Box Office Poison"***

*Box Office Poison* is exactly the sort of show that would gestate in the mind of an embittered, cross-dressing, vaudeville-obsessed director who was sick and bloody tired of tangling with half-assed scripts. Said director would sit in an empty theater (in something

silky), thinking up punny one-liners and giggling, waiting for the day when he could write, direct, and star in his *own* play, with no one to fuck things up.

Based on his Fringe offering, Marc Geller seems to be that director. Set in 1956 (with distinct 1930s overtones), his drag spectacular is a theater nerd's dream—two mouthy, middle-aged broads (the Fabulous Kane sisters, played by Geller and co-writer Bill Roulet) become the headlining act in a floundering vaudeville show full of deliciously old-school theater-types. An endless string of murders begins, but that doesn't stop Lana and Nova Kane (ha! ha!) from seducing their costars, cracking wise, and making self-congratulatingly obscure theater references.

Geller (who has truly beautiful legs) gets points for being a canny director who has coaxed his entire talented cast to fever pitch, sculpting an energetic and seamlessly stylized production. Clever quips fly like shrapnel, and they occasionally hit the mark: When a balding Romeo moans, "Call me but love!" (*butt* love!), most theatergoers can't help but giggle. But when Lana greets a mystic in a turban by crowing, "Oh! A happy medium!" it's only the beginning of a slew of hammy lines that beg to be followed by two drum beats and a cymbal crash. And that kind of onanistic humor is wearing. RUTH McCANN