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HUFFPOST ARTS & CULTURE

Theater: Daniel Kitson Returns; Musical "Oliver!" Needs More

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ANALOG.UE ** 1/2 out of ****

OLIVER! ** out of ****

ANALOG.UE ** 1/2 out of ****

ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

Daniel Kitson is a stand-up comic when he's not being a monologist when he's not being an artiste, the sort of word that would perhaps get under his skin unless he recognized the irony of it as pertaining to his work since it is in fact artistry of a very high order but one that effortlessly avoids pretensions.

He broke through here in the US -- or to be more precise, he broke through for me -- with the "story show" *The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church*, a remarkable one-man show that displayed Kitson's talents at their finest. It was funny, smart, enjoyably convoluted, quirky and quite heart-on-its-sleeve emotional. I was gobsmacked and I can say that because I'm British but really I grew up in America so I should just say it was amazing and made me an immediate and intense fan.

I saw his next "story show" -- as opposed to one of his stand-up performances -- which was *It's Always Right Now, Until It's Later*. Again we saw several seemingly unrelated storylines converge and we reveled in Kitson's unique stage presence. He stutters at times, plays off momentary quirks in that evening's performance and generally creates an air of spontaneity despite his shows being carefully crafted, Rube Goldberg-type constructions with various time lines and characters that come together with a flourish a la that cinematic trope seen in *Amores Perros* and *Babel* and the like. It covered some of the same territory but he was still fresh enough to me so it too was one of my favorite shows of the year.

His stand up act is of a very similar vein, free-flowing and quick-witted and the best of its kind since Eddie Izzard (which is to say, that it's not like Izzard at all and that Izzard is not like others -- they are unique talents, which is how they are alike).

Looking through his credits online I see we've only caught a sliver of his output so far, which now extends to a tentative doubling of people onstage via a two-person show that has been done in the hinterlands of the UK. I fear with his new show that we're seeing Kitson stuck in a bit of a rut, working with structure and outside techniques because he fears repeating himself. That may be entirely unfair and I back into it because I have loved his work so much -- the little I've seen -- and honestly can't wait to see him push himself and do more.

But here we are again with *Analog.ue*, another show very similar to the last two. It has two central characters who are seemingly unconnected but eventually converge in some way. It's funny and sharp and has some wonderfully vivid and sad vignettes, details that

stay with you. In 1977, Thomas is sitting in his garage at the behest of his wife. An elderly man, Thomas has been receiving audio equipment from his wife as a running gag for decades and she's been insisting with increasing vehemence that he record stories of his life, put it all out there. Now, finally, on this fateful day, Thomas is doing so.

Far into the future, a lonely woman named Gertie leads a quiet, barren existence, answering the phones at a business, eating her yogurt in a darkened closet on her breaks and obsessed with the voice of Thomas she heard on a recording machine Gertie found as a child. Kitson jumps back and forth between these two lives and every time he announces the year: Thomas is recording in 1977, it's so-and-so year and Gertie is this many years old. A little math let's us realize that Gertie was born the year Thomas made his tapes. Is she his granddaughter? Was she born on the day he made these audio records of his life, ramblings and amusings that would interest almost no one? Quietly, these stories converge as they have before with Kitson.

None of this is to indicate the way these stories are told. In fact, they aren't told at all, since Kitson doesn't say a word. The cavernous performance space is mostly dark, with a small desk under a light. Then a bright light way way in the back comes on and we see Kitson next to a jumble of old audio equipment of various types. He comes forward with one, plugs it in, sets the machine on the ground with a wire trailing to the desk and presses play. We get a taped introduction with Kitson explaining that he's going to tell the story by hauling out various pieces of equipment and hopefully turning one off and pressing another one on at just the right time so the story can move forward. And so he does. Occasionally, Kitson offers a modest bit of physical interplay but mostly he's moving back and forth, an attendant more than a performer. Soon the floor around the desk features a scattering of reel to reels and cassette decks and the like. It's like an audio octopus, with Kitson's recorded voices coming out of the near darkness and blinking red and green lights letting us know which machine is "speaking" at the moment. It's a bit like watching Janet Cardiff construct one of her audio installations right in front of you.

To be sure, it's a technical challenge -- which machine do you grab next? when do you press play? -- but it's more art piece than live theater. The varying levels of sound and audio quality give each machine its own sense of character and vary the listening experience for the audience. It's an interesting concept, but it robs Kitson's show of their strongest suit: Kitson himself. He's a thoroughly engaging actor and while the brief moments that he improvises in other shows are surely just that -- brief -- he is engagingly alive and bristling with intelligence in a way that makes you sit up and pay notice. But that spontaneity is lacking in a pre-recorded performance done in bits and pieces and the show suffers for it. And it doesn't mask the very similar nature of this story to the others I've seen. Now there's nothing wrong with doing this type of tale for the rest of his life: John Ford made a lot of westerns and John Updike didn't suddenly start writing about the poor of Eastern Europe, did he? But there is immense variety within these genres, characters that surprise and delight us. Kitson can do that and will do it again, but messing with how a story is presented does not grapple with the story itself. If his two person play simply breaks up the two characters whose lives converge, with one actor reciting one monologue and the other one the other without them actually interacting, then it won't really be a radical break either.

I still found the show intellectually and to a degree emotionally engaging. A critic is not a reporter but two people I urged to come were baffled by the dates and convoluted telling, as was a friend who had seen Kitson several times before. I found the story crystal clear though apparently I may just be confused: I've also seen the woman in the separate story described as his daughter, though that seems impossible given his age and what we know by the end of the show. (Perhaps I got my dates wrong?) Apparently others were confused or distracted by the performance style as well. I had imagined Kitson might use the recordings to interact with other voices without having the bother of dealing with other voices, that is, other actors. Perhaps he'll tackle this idea again in another show and use the various taped bits not to create technical challenges for himself but to embrace the creative challenges it can offer for his storytelling. He is indeed a storyteller and I'm eager to hear the next one soon.

OLIVER! ** out of ****

PAPERMILL PLAYHOUSE

The Papermill Playhouse was the original home for *Newsies* and apparently they have an endless supply of chorus boys who can sing and dance. Guys both young, teenaged and older fill the stage in this holiday presentation of *Oliver!*, the musical based on the Dickens novel *Oliver Twist*. It's a good-natured show brimming with some of the shakiest British accents this side of Dick Van Dyke. But the musical numbers by Lionel Bart couldn't be catchier and it's one of the handsomest productions the Papermill has ever created.

You probably know the story, though I'd never seen it on stage and barely remember the movie so it was pretty new to me. Oliver is a sad but adorable orphan who has the temerity to ask for more gruel one mealtime. Astonished at such a trouble maker, Oliver is soon whisked away by his betters and sold to a family of undertakers. They taunt him, their assistant taunts him and soon Oliver runs away. He's taken in by a gang of pickpockets led by the greedy Fagin and the equally adorable rascal known as the Artful Dodger. Oliver bungles his first job and is arrested only to be rescued by the man whose pocket he picked. In a twist even Dickens should have been ashamed of, it turns out Oliver is the long-lost nephew (or in this production grandson, I think) of the wealthy gentleman. But the underworld worries Oliver might reveal their lair and his good luck isn't about to last, not when the vicious Bill Sykes is around. Will Oliver find a real home? Will Bill ever stop beating the barmaid Nancy? The only sure bet is that the catchy songs will never stop.



All the tech elements of this show are top-notch. The sets by Mark Morton are Broadway worthy, creating a vivid sense of the orphanage, the lair of criminals, the wealthy side of town and always a sense of the bustling London in which these adventures are set. Ditto the excellent costumes by Amanda Seymour, which feel specific to the period but neither too colorful (which makes them look like costumes) nor too raggedy (which makes them distracting). They feel authentic in a very pleasing way. The lighting, the sound, the hair and wigs all contribute as well in a show that looks even better than *Newsies*, the most famed transfer from Papermill in recent years. Most importantly, the music supervisor and conductor Craig Barna has an orchestra sounding just terrific, also at Broadway-level quality. It's a wonderful frame for the story and the actors.

Unfortunately, director Mark S. Hoebee has the cast pitched to a very broad style indeed. It ain't Shakespeare but these stories are usually funnier and more enjoyable when the characters take them seriously.

Of course the hardest parts to cast are the children, specifically Oliver and the Artful Dodger. Tyler Moran plays our hero and unfortunately doesn't sing very well or hold the stage as an actor. He has great trouble with enunciation (the accent certainly doesn't help) and the scenes in the rich man's home were especially garbled and painful to watch. In fairness, Oliver as a character does virtually nothing in this telling of the tale. I doubt even Laurence Olivier as a child could do much with it. Oliver's a pawn pushed around by others. He has no opportunity to be brave or true, to stick up for someone weaker than him or win us by some deed or plucky spirit. He's simply a rather anonymous boy and only an actor with tremendous charisma can make it even a decent part. Plus, his big number "Where Is Love?" is an exceptionally difficult song for a child to sing. Ethan Haberfield has better luck as the Artful Dodger...but only when singing and dancing. Then his confidence and personality come through. When he has to talk, Haberfield has an accent that feels more like a spoof of British accents.

The adults are better. Fagin should be a show stopper, though, not just better than child performers who fall short. David Garrison avoids the caricatures that plagued Fagin in the past, but his scenes slip by smoothly rather than popping out with menace and charm. Far better is John Treacy Egan as Mr. Bumble and Jessica Sheridan as the Widow Corney. Their banter and playfulness strikes the right balance of fun and seriousness. Best of all are Betsy Morgan as Nancy and Jose Llana as Bill. He has good presence and is especially strong in his opening number "My Name." She's even more of a knockout, making the most of a tough as nails broad with a heart of gold who gets to sing rousing numbers like "It's A Fine Life," "Oom-Pah-Pah" and her ballad "As Long As He Needs Me." I hope to see her again soon.

And it seems endemic to the show, but the finale is awfully rushed. Here Nancy dies, Bill is shot (I couldn't even see by whom) and the show comes to a halt without even a final reprise of a big number. Then Fagin abruptly decides to give his precious jewels to the Dodger and mend his ways, but a stray bit of diamond bring out his greed all over again? And that's it? Surely the reunion of Oliver and his relatives begs for a reprise of "Consider Yourself" since Oliver really *has* finally found his home and the Artful Dodger had one all along with the mercenary Fagin. It seems inconceivable the show just ends like that, without a song.

Of course this is the holiday show at Papermill so that means a curtain call where they *do* reprise a show's number and then launch into a holiday carol while snow falls from the ceiling in an annual tradition that fits in with *Oliver!* quite nicely.

And though an *Oliver!* without a strong Oliver or Dodger or vivid Fagin can only do so much, the parade of catchy, effective numbers delivered well by a strong orchestra certainly makes for a pleasant evening. "Food, Glorious Food," "Boy For Sale," the memorable act two "Who Will Buy?" and "Pick A Pocket Or Two" are just some of the treats on offer. It's enough to make you go out and buy a cast album.

THE THEATER OF 2013 (on a four star scale)

The Other Place ** 1/2

Picnic * 1/2

Opus No. 7 ** 1/2

Deceit * 1/2

Life And Times Episodes 1-4 **

Cat On A Hot Tin Roof (w Scarlett Johansson) * 1/2

The Jammer ***

Blood Play ** 1/2

Manilow On Broadway ** 1/2

Women Of Will ** 1/2

All In The Timing ***

Isaac's Eye ***

Bunnica: A Rabbit Tale Of Musical Mystery ** 1/2

The Mnemonist Of Dutchess County * 1/2

Much Ado About Nothing ***
Really Really *
Parsifal at the Met *** 1/2
The Madrid * 1/2
The Wild Bride at St. Ann's ** 1/2
Passion at CSC *** 1/2
Carousel at Lincoln Center ***
The Revisionist **
Rodgers & Hammerstein's Cinderella ***
Rock Of Ages * 1/2
Ann ** 1/2
Old Hats ***
The Flick ***
Detroit '67 ** 1/2
Howling Hilda reading * (Mary Testa ***)
Hit The Wall *
Breakfast At Tiffany's * 1/2
The Mound Builders at Signature *
Vanya And Sonia And Masha And Spike *** 1/2
Cirque Du Soleil's Totem ***
The Lying Lesson * 1/2
Hands On A Hardbody *
Kinky Boots **
Matilda The Musical *** 1/2
The Rascals: Once Upon A Dream ***
Motown: The Musical **
La Ruta ** 1/2
The Big Knife *
The Nance ***
The Assembled Parties ** 1/2
Jekyll & Hyde * 1/2
Thoroughly Modern Millie ** 1/2
Macbeth w Alan Cumming *
Orphans ** 1/2
The Testament Of Mary ** 1/2
The Drawer Boy **
The Trip To Bountiful ***
I'll Eat You Last ** 1/2
Pippin *
This Side Of Neverland ***
A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney ***
Natasha, Pierre And The Great Comet Of 1812 ***
Colin Quinn Unconstitutional ** 1/2
A Family For All Occasions *
The Weir *** 1/2
Disney's The Little Mermaid **
Far From Heaven **
The Caucasian Chalk Circle **
Somewhere Fun **
Venice no stars
Reasons To Be Happy **
STePz *** 1/2
The Comedy of Errors (Shakespeare In The Park) ***
Roadkill ** 1/2
Forever Tango ***
Monkey: Journey To The West ** 1/2
The Civilians: Be The Death Of Me ***
NYMF: Swiss Family Robinson **
NYMF: Dizzy Miss Lizzie's Roadside Revue Presents The Brontes * 1/2

NYMF: Mata Hari in 8 Bullets ***
NYMF: Life Could Be A Dream **
NYMF: Mother Divine **
NYMF: Julian Po ** 1/2
NYMF: Marry Harry **
NYMF: Gary Goldfarb: Master Escapist ** 1/2
NYMF: Castle Walk ***
NYMF: Crossing Swords ***
NYMF: Bend In The Road *** 1/2
NYMF: Homo The Musical no stars
NYMF: Volleygirls *** 1/2
Murder For Two **
Let it Be **
The Cheaters Club *
All The Faces Of The Moon *
Women Or Nothing ** 1/2
Mr. Burns, A Post-Electric Play * 1/2
You Never Can Tell ***
Romeo And Juliet *
Arguendo **
August Wilson's American Century Cycle ****
The Glass Menagerie ** 1/2
Lady Day * 1/2
Julius Caesar at St. Ann's Warehouse ****
Honeymoon In Vegas: The Musical ** 1/2
Bronx Bombers * 1/2
Romeo & Juliet at CSC * 1/2
A Night With Janis Joplin **
The Winslow Boy ***
Juno And The Paycock **
How I Learned To Drive **
Fun Home **
Two Boys at the Met **
Big Fish **
A Time To Kill * 1/2
Year Of The Rooster ***
The Snow Geese ** 1/2
A Midsummer Night's Dream ** 1/2
The Lady in Red Converses With Diablo ** 1/2
After Midnight ***
La Soiree ***
Nothing To Hide ** 1/2
The Patron Saint Of Sea Monsters **
Die Frau Ohne Schatten/The Woman Without A Shadow at the Met
Little Miss Sunshine **
Souvenir ** 1/2
A Gentleman's Guide To Love & Murder *** 1/2
Twelfth Night *** 1/2
King Richard The Third ***
Lies My Father Told Me **
Regular Singing **
And Away We Go **
Analog.ue at St. Ann's Warehouse ** 1/2
Oliver! at Papermill **

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Note: *Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.*

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