

August 29, 2012

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SAMUEL & ALASDAIR: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE ROBOT WAR ** 1/2 out of ****

DEDALUS LOUNGE * 1/2

HOW THE WORLD BEGAN * 1/2

SAMUEL & ALASDAIR: A PERSONAL HISTORY OF THE ROBOT WAR ** 1/2 out of ****

THE NEW OHIO THEATRE

This inventive work doesn't have quite enough emotional heft to take it to the next level. But it's clever and fun

and the individual elements and cast are strong enough to make you glad you saw it and want to see their next work. The story is multi-layered but quite simple, really. It takes place in a pirate radio station apparently in the former Soviet Union. Four people have come together to put on their weekly radio show in broken English. That show contains a story -- their *favorite* story -- set in America about two brothers who love the same girl back in an earlier, simpler time. One of the brothers is a star quarterback and has it all. The other is quieter and weaker and prone to visions of alien attacks.

Soon we realize that in this world the alien invasion depicted in the radio drama *War Of The Worlds* really took place and that much of the US was wiped out right away and the rest of the world is being mopped up. Thanks to power outages and the desperate hope in their eyes when they ask people to call in, it's clear these people may be some of the last survivors...but not for long.

The four actors relish their dual roles featuring thickly accented Russian in the present and magically accent-free English when they're performing the radio play. Michael Dalto has a mostly silent role as a musician. Stephanie Wright Thompson plays the woman who is the object of affection both for the farm boys in the play within the play and for the two men in the present. One of those two is an egghead doctor (Marc Bovino) that we can see is suffering from radiation sickness. The other is the radio show's host played by Joe Curnutte. All are strong though Curnutte has the most substantial part and the most fun (he was also in the successful drama *Unnatural Acts* at Classic Stage Company).

Director Lila Neugebauer (who also helped conceive the show) creates some very effective moments, such as a scene where the woman Anastasia is singing and her voice becomes a dim echo while other scenes are enacted or the striking use of total darkness before an extended monologue. It's a fine showcase for some talented performers.

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DEDALUS LOUNGE * 1/2
INTERART THEATRE

The best actors in the world can't bring a weak play to life. That's the unfortunate case with this new drama by Gary Duggan. It offers the familiar tale of three friends who apparently stayed in touch after drama class. Anthony Rapp is a sad-sack fellow whose wife is always cheating on him and who half-heartedly dreams of starting a Queen cover band. Dee Roscioli is unlucky in love and has an ailing Grandmother she's responsible for. James Kautz is the live wire, the loser who likes to muck things up for others to distract from the miserable mess of his own life. Sexual tension abounds.

You can take it from there, including an unexpected kiss between two friends, frustrated romance with unseen others, painful revelations and a knock-down drag out New Year's Eve. Not a moment of it is surprising or fresh. Director Chris Henry tries to liven things up thanks to the musical numbers that take place mostly (if not all) in the mind of Rapp's character. The music and odes to Queen are also an excuse for the two bartenders in the lounge where our characters meet to dance together and with the cast. The choreography by JoAnn M. Hunter under less than ideal conditions is fine while Heather Phillips and especially the appealing Curtis Howard create some emotional moments in their time at center stage.

With a lot more dialogue, our three main actors do a lot less, despite their talents. Rapp is of course a marvelous actor but his character's very tepid idea of performing Queen songs never really connects on any level so it doesn't work as an explosive way of hearing about the inner turmoil the characters are facing (Rapp and Daniel A. Weiss wrote the original songs). Roscioli does the best, perhaps because her character makes the most sense.

Unfortunately, Kautz has the central role of a man meant to be magnetic and dangerous and sexy and scary and as written he is none of the above. Near the end, the character talks to the audience and says they probably either want to have sex with him or beat the crap out of him. Actually, no. He just seems like a sad, uninteresting person and the sexual confusion tossed in later along with childhood revelations of abuse and other dramatics feel tossed in and quite perfunctory. The allusion to Joyce? Just as perfunctory as the rest of it.

HOW THE WORLD BEGAN * 1/2
PETER JAY SHARP THEATRE

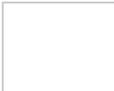
This is an "issue" play in search of an issue. In Catherine Trieschmann's drama, the liberal New York science teacher Susan (Heidi Schreck) has come to Plainview Kansas in the wake of a disaster to offer her help and pitch in at the local high school. Micah (Justin Kruger) is the awkward student who comes to her with a concern about a comment she made in class on evolution. Gene (the always solid Adam LeFevre) is the adult caring for Micah now that the boy is an orphan (that disaster again).

It's apparent very quickly that Susan made a gratuitous and unnecessary comment mocking the religious beliefs of anyone who thinks that life on earth was created by God. She calls any other theory gobbledygook. No one asked her to teach religious beliefs in her science class (such as Creationism disguised as Intelligent Design). No student asked her about the Bible. She just casually and wrongly tossed out the barb. Micah calls her on it and thinks she should apologize. Susan denies it, the problem escalates, she soon admits having made the statement and concedes it might have been not the best thing to do and in the ensuing discussion finds it difficult to go five minutes without cursing or taking the Lord's name in vain. (Oh, those liberal New Yorkers!)

The problem with this problem play is that there is no problem. Micah is a sad kid but he's quite reasonable. His unofficial guardian Gene is even more straightforward and friendly and accommodating. Now a bad teacher or a person incapable of not ruffling feathers or a woman determined to raise a little hell or too clueless to realize she's in the wrong -- I suppose any of this could create a decent drama. But the play doesn't really acknowledge how essentially wrong Susan is in her actions.

Instead, in a desperate attempt to pump up the tension, we're tossed all sorts of red meat like the fact that this single woman is also visibly pregnant. Then there's the unnamed disaster which goes unexplained for too long. After far too much murky reference (was it a terrorist attack?), it turns out to be just a tornado that killed a number of people. So why the mystery? Toss in Micah's burning guilt over the death of his hated step-dad (a particularly lame twist) and the burning of a scarecrow on the teacher's lawn and you've got a whole lot of nothing that can't disguise the fact that if the central character in this drama wasn't a bad teacher who refuses to apologize for a rude and unnecessary comment that there'd be no story.

LeFevre is most effective at making the decent, friendly Gene into a convincing person. Kruger has to carry some heavy personal loads and almost keeps Micah genuine up to the absurd late twists. Schreck has such a poorly written and unlikeable character she can do little with it. The set and costumes by Clint Ramos are simple and effective though by and large the efforts of director Daniella Topol and her team are wasted on a dull work. If this weren't a drama written by a woman, directed by a woman and presented by Women's Project Theater along with South Coast Repertory, the suggestion that at least some of the teacher's foolish actions can be explained by her pregnancy would be risible.

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Teaching evolution in high school is a delicate subject fraught with danger for teachers (who often and unfortunately avoid the topic as much as possible for that very reason). No natural disasters, hot-button issues like single motherhood or deep dark secrets are needed to turn it into compelling drama. And when those things are present, they can't disguise the lack of drama either.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

- The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs* ** 1/2
- All-American* **
- All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park* **
- The Atmosphere Of Memory* 1/2 *
- Bonnie & Clyde* feature profile of *Jeremy Jordan*
- Broadway By The Year: 1997* ** 1/2
- The Cherry Orchard with Dianne Wiest* **
- Chinglish* * 1/2
- Close Up Space* *
- Crane Story* **
- Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre* ***
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- An Evening With Patti Lupone and Mandy Patinkin* ***
- Follies* *** 1/2
- Fragments* ***
- Godspell* ** 1/2
- Goodbar* * 1/2
- Hair* ***
- Hand To God* ***
- Hero: The Musical* * 1/2
- How The World Began* * 1/2
- Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway* ***
- Irving Berlin's White Christmas* ***
- King Lear at Public with Sam Waterston* **
- Krapp's Last Tape with John Hurt* ***
- Lake Water* **
- Love's Labor's Lost at the PublicLab* ** 1/2
- Lysistrata Jones* *
- Man And Boy* * 1/2
- The Man Who Came To Dinner* **
- Maple And Vine* **
- Master Class w Tyne Daly* ** 1/2
- Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park* ***
- Milk Like Sugar* ***
- Mission Drift* * 1/2
- Misterman* ** 1/2
- The Mountaintop* ** 1/2
- Newsies* **
- Pigpen's The Nightmare Story* *** 1/2
- Once* *** 1/2
- Olive and The Bitter Herbs* ** 1/2
- On A Clear Day You Can See Forever* * 1/2
- One Arm* ***
- Other Desert Cities on Broadway* ** 1/2
- Private Lives* **
- Queen Of The Mist* ** 1/2
- Radio City Christmas Spectacular* ** 1/2
- Relatively Speaking* * 1/2
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- The Select (The Sun Also Rises)* ** 1/2
- Seminar* **
- Septimus & Clarissa* *** 1/2
- Shlemiel The First* ** 1/2
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- Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark* * 1/2
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Wild Animals You Should Know ** 1/2
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NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

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Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free on iTunes. Visit Michael Giltz at his [website](#) and his [daily blog](#). Download his podcast of celebrity interviews and his radio show, also called *Popsurfing* and also [available](#) for free on iTunes. Link to him on Netflix and [gain](#) access to thousands of ratings and reviews.

Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to the shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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