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Theater: F. Murray Abraham, Early O'Neill and a Victorian Adventuress

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GALILEO ** out of ****

EARLY PLAYS* out of ****

SONG FROM THE UPROAR **

The winter theater season in New York has a certain rhythm. A few shows open on Broadway and then there's a lull until the crush of big names in March, April and May. That lull allows adventurous Off Broadway and other venues to step in with works that can gain attention without having to steal the spotlight from juggernauts like *Death Of A Salesman* and *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Here are three shows, all of them aiming high though not succeeding for one reason or another.

GALILEO ** out of ****

CLASSIC STAGE COMPANY

The Classic Stage Company has enjoyed such a great run of shows these past few seasons -- *Venus In Fur*, *The Three Sisters*, *School For Lies*, *New Jerusalem*, *Unnatural Acts* -- that you come to its productions with the very highest of expectations. This staging of Bertolt Brecht's *Galileo* does not meet them, despite the presence of actor F. Murray Abraham in the title role.

Any great work should be timeless, but one wishes *Galileo* didn't remain so timely. Anyone who thinks the (unnecessary) tug of war between faith and reason is over simply isn't paying attention. But for all the fireworks evolution and global warming and countless other topics set off in the public arena, this play (using the Charles Laughton translation) feels rather tepid. The stakes seem very low indeed.

Abraham plays Galileo, the scientist pressured by the Church to renounce his findings that the Earth revolves around the sun. He is in virtual house arrest after doing so, dismaying his followers. But Galileo secretly continues his important work, smuggling out his final papers via a loyal if distraught assistant who thought the great man had buckled under pressure. It's a battle for truth, reason and indeed a battle for faith since faith that is threatened by knowledge and facts is no faith at all but simply tyranny of the soul. You wouldn't know it here, with the actors rather quietly going about their various schemes and delivering their monologues while the audience patiently waits for some sense of high drama.

The set by Adrienne Lobel has some impressive looking planets with grey mottled surfaces hanging from the ceiling like land mines. The floor is, of course, a circular affair with scientific markings on it and the actors circle each other, with Abraham rather randomly addressing the audience at one or two moments.

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I couldn't grasp any rhyme or reason as to when or why this happened -- it felt haphazard. On the wall hangs a round window that at times displays projections of planetary objects, eclipses and the like. All of it is fine if unremarkable.

But with no passion, no guiding sense of why they felt it essential to perform this play at this time, it never catches fire. Abraham plays a very reasonable Galileo, not unduly cruel in ignoring the terrible fate his actions mean for the daughter (Amanda Quaid) that stands by him despite how he trashes her marriage prospects. However, Abraham still seemed to be nailing down his lines during this preview. Perhaps he'll sharpen during the run.

Nick Westrate (*Unnatural Acts* and *Love's Labors Lost* at the Public) continues to impress. But too many of the major speeches simply make no impression. And it's telling that the opening song in Act Two falls entirely flat while the postscript where the faithful servant Andrea (Andy Phelan) tries to bring reason to a peasant seems tacked on. This show has no cohesion.

EARLY PLAYS * out of **** ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE

Film director John Ford made so many great movies - *The Searchers*, *Stagecoach*, *The Quiet Man*, the Calvary Trilogy -- that some terrific films have fallen by the wayside. I know friends who think *They Were Expendable* one of the great war films. And others love *The Long Voyage Home*, the 1940 film about sailors who spend their life on the sea. It's a curious project based on four early plays by Eugene O'Neill. O'Neill and Ford might seem an odd mix, but here they both find common ground in the sad but sentimental tales of men who whore and drink when a ship is in port, face death at sea and yearn for a better life.

The movie is quite strong with one fatal flaw that keeps it from greatness: John Wayne is cast as Olsen, an innocent young Swede who is saving his money to return home and start a farm. John Wayne is many things but a chameleon he is not and his absurd Swedish accent and attempt to "by jiminy" his way through the dialogue is almost comical. Why they didn't simply switch his character to an American is beyond me. Everyone else from Ward Bond to Barry Fitzgerald is spot on. It's worth a look despite Wayne.

So I was delighted to find out that St. Ann's Warehouse and the Wooster Group were collaborating on three of the four short plays that formed the basis of the film. They're called the Glencairn plays (the name of the ship) and now, finally, I'd be able to see these works with an actor who would at least have a chance of convincing me they were Swedish.

No such luck. Not only did the actor playing Olsen not provide a convincing Swedish accent, he didn't even try. Nor did anyone else in this curious boondoggle of a show. This production is directed by Richard Maxwell who apparently takes the same tack with many plays -- he instructs the actors to deliver their dialogue in a flat sort of monotone, with no attempt to capture the dialect of the speaker or the music of the playwright. The effect reminded me of a Wes Anderson film where they stage a play within a play -- such as high school students performing *Serpico* -- and the dialogue is delivered with a flat aplomb.

I'm not terribly eager to see this style used on another play, but I can imagine how it might possibly somehow offer a new way of thinking about a classic work that an audience had seen many times before (like *Hamlet* or Oscar Wilde or something). But to use it for an unfamiliar work like this makes no sense.

It's certainly not going for comedy since the bittersweet stories of the play work against that. However, in the second act, when the handsome Enver Chakartash comes out as the Captain and delivers his dialect in a flat monotone, the contrast between the dialogue and his delivery is so severe the audience burst out laughing. A few nervous titters reappeared in Act Three but soon subsided. They're not playing this for laughs and the audience soon accepted that, albeit reluctantly, and sank back into confused silence.

The staging seems almost perverse. The second act takes place mostly in the cramped quarters of the sailors where the Yank (Brian Mendes) is slowly dying, with Driscoll by his side. The Yank has a terrific monologue that Ward Bond delivered quite movingly in the film. Here, within the flat-lined emotion of this production, Mendes can do very little. It doesn't help that those cramped quarters are placed in the far back corner of the stage, rather than downstage as close to the audience as possible. Plus, there's a thin pole blocking the view of some audience members and then a sailor strides forward to stand on deck further blocking the view during this quiet intimate moment.

Ari Flakos as Driscoll seems most in tune with the particular style Maxwell encourages. But no one can really work on their own unless the entire vision works. No one would accuse Maxwell of being timid but when you swing for the fences you'll either make contact or strike out. Here he strikes out.

SONG FROM THE UPROAR ** out of **** THE KITCHEN

If you've never heard of the little known adventurer and writer [Isabelle Eberhardt](#), her tale is the sort that will astonish you. Eberhardt was born in Switzerland in 1877. Early on in life she began dressing like a man to take advantage of the relative freedom it gave her. An illegitimate child, she and her mother learned Arabic and converted to Islam after traveling to Africa and the Middle East. Thoroughly unconventional, Eberhardt would work as a war reporter, write short stories ([translated into English by Paul Bowles](#)), travel to holy sites banned to all but Muslim males, take a lover, survive an attempt on her life and then plead for the man to be spared and finally drown...in the desert. (A flash flood destroyed the mud hut where she and her husband were staying.)

The [journals detailing the last four years of her short life](#) (she died at 27) were discovered after the flood and eventually published. Composer Missy Mazzoli like others before her, stumbled on these writings, was moved by Eberhardt's life and transfixed by how it embodied so many themes of the 21st century.



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That life has already been turned into a movie (apparently, not a good one) in 1991.

But Mazzoli did not want to do a narrative that documented this rather extraordinary, dramatically rich life. Her opera, or mixed media piece if you prefer, is a mediation on Eberhardt's story, a spiritual journey of the mind. Unfortunately, Mazzoli and her collaborator on the libretto Royce Vavrek have succeeded all too well in avoiding anything like a narrative or emotional content in this atmospheric but vague piece.

It begins quite beautifully with an Overture that introduces us to Eberhardt (Abigail Fischer) while a scrim displays found footage of a woman in a bathing suit dreamily floating up and down and around. Throughout the piece, the technical aspects are top-notch (despite a lighting snafu before the show began), with the music performance by the Now Ensemble led by Steven Osgood and the other elements all coming together smoothly. If you've read the notes and know that Eberhardt drowned in a flash flood, this imagery and music at the beginning can be quite haunting. (However, I would not use music from the show as a scene-setter before the performance begins; it dims some of the impact.)

That's about it for the found footage discovered and incorporated by filmmaker Stephen Taylor. All too often the footage seen throughout feels random or its opposite -- too nail on the head, such as the shots of flower buds closing during the piece where Eberhardt sings "How quickly love evaporates." Again and again we see the image of a father walking hand in hand with his little daughter, footage that is processed and reprocessed to haunt the piece, though since we don't know what childhood memories they might evoke for Eberhardt (happy? painful?) the lack of context robs it of power.

Again and again, someone reading the notes of the libretto ("Isabelle falls in love with an Algerian soldier," "Her lover insists on a suicide pact," "Isabelle is nearly assassinated by a rival religious fanatic") will discover exciting events. But onstage there's not even an elliptical, vague sense of the dramatic. Fischer has a thrilling and distinctive voice and gives her all in a committed, vocal performance but she cannot bring the show to life by sheer will. A few pieces coalesce into something memorable, like "100 Names For God," but those moments are rare.

It's telling that the most interesting and dramatic moment comes when Isabelle ventures behind the backstage scrim to flirt with the musicians, taking a seat next to the pianist, tapping away on the keys and ultimately pushing him aside while she belts out "Chanson" in French and English. It's a rare moment when there's an actual interaction between Isabelle and another person and all too briefly the show gains a little emotional impact.

The costumes are good though there's no attempt to show Isabelle's evolution. She is dressed beautifully but in a somewhat mannish manner from the start. Here as everywhere else, there's no dramatic arc. However, the other singers and dancers are dressed in grey while Isabelle has dashes of beauty, creating a nice effect with costumes (Alexandra Gage Englund) and lighting (Scott Bolman) that Isabelle is living a life in color while the rest of the world is in black and white. (I take it for granted the contrast is not meant to be between the West and the East.) An early flourish where umbrellas fly up to the rafters is quite lovely though the effect is spoiled when it's repeated a moment later with wreaths as well. Throughout, the straightforward direction by Gia Forakis keeps us focused on the key moment at hand.

Theatrical works like this are notoriously difficult to pull off. Philip Glass's *Einstein On The Beach* has no narrative like the one I miss so much here. But it like his other Portrait Operas are meditations on historical figures we're all familiar with or can easily peg. Somehow, at some intuitive, creative level the imagery and dance and music and lighting and sound and text combine to take the audience on a spiritual journey. You couldn't explain what is happening on stage but you know that something indeed truly is and that it matters. Here, that alchemy simply doesn't happen despite the noble efforts of everyone involved.

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

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When Jesus has died for your sins and the bright lights break out and the orchestra plays the triumphant "da-da-dum" of the title song and the actor playing Jesus strides in blazing white to the front of the stage, you can't help but feel it would be churlish not to rise to your feet, whatever you thought of the show.

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