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## FringeFest NYC #2 -- Leonard Cohen, Shakespeare, Russian Jews And More

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FringeFest NYC is always worth diving into -- see enough shows and you're sure to spot a talented writer or actor or director. With almost 200 shows, you can luck into a string of great shows while a friend who sees a different lineup bemoans the quality. No festival is the same for any two people. Its unknowability -- there are simply too many shows for anyone to know what the festival was *really* like overall -- is part of the fun. Here's a look at some of the shows I've caught so far.

### LEONARD COHEN KOANS \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

Don't miss this one. I'm a serious fan of Leonard Cohen, though strangely I've never seen him in concert. So this

show containing a combination of his prose and poetry and songs immediately caught my eye. Lead singer Ali Hughes is, I think, from Australia (if it's New Zealand, forgive me, Ali). She resembles Michelle Pfeiffer circa *The Fabulous Baker Boys* and has a terrific voice. Her collective *Ali & The Thieves* present an exceptionally well-crafted show of Cohen's music featuring subtly adventurous arrangements that take his music into rock and soul territory with aplomb. Hughes combines lesser known gems with some of the inescapable standards like "Suzanne" (delivered straight until it opens up into a raucous coda), "Sisters Of Mercy" (cleverly ended with Hughes declaiming the names of women from Cohen's songs and life) and "Famous Blue Raincoat." "Dance Me To The End Of Love" is a good example of what they do:

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Cohen's version is stately where Hughes makes the song slinkily sexual if not downright lascivious. I first fell in love with Leonard Cohen's music thanks to the Jennifer Warnes tribute album *Famous Blue Raincoat*, which definitely leaned towards the pop/folk side. If and when Hughes hopefully records her show, that album will be an excellent complement to the Warnes classic, showing what other directions his music can go in. I can't think of higher praise.

Here is Ali Hughes performing "Dance Me To The End Of Love" as Ali & The Thieves.

#### ROMEO & JULIET: CHOOSE YOUR OWN ENDING \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

This goof on *Romeo & Juliet* by the **Impressionable Players** is unsatisfied with a play where Romeo begins by declaring his undying love for Rosaline but soon switches gears and insists he really loves Juliet, not to mention that dawner of an ending. Hence this modest comedy by brother and sister team Ann and Shawn Fraistat, with Ann also directing the six member cast. At various stages, the play stops and the audience votes on what happens next: go for Juliet or swerve back to Rosaline, live happily ever after or die miserably, and so on. The game cast mugs their way through the proceedings, with James Waters ably providing the calm center of the storm as Romeo. The rest are appropriately shameless in their desire to elicit laughs but the thin material gives them precious little to work with.

#### RACHEL CALOF \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

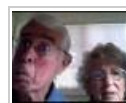
This is an intelligently made, well-acted one-woman show about the life of a Russian Jewish immigrant who travels alone to America at the turn of the century and finds herself in North Dakota in a tiny shack, cheek by jowl with a new husband and his pushy relatives. It's a drama with music, for Rachel's story is punctuated at times by song. Kate Fuglei plays **Rachel Calof**, tackling the tricky accent and songs with aplomb. She shines especially on the early numbers "Lullabye -- Beyond The Last Hill" and the show's high point "America," which captures the frightening thrill of heading to a new life and a new continent. Later songs -- by Leslie Steinweiss -- don't always reach that high standard and Fuglei's voice sometimes ventures into classical territory that seems less natural for Rachel. The script by Ken LaZebnik touches on all the expected moments: Rachel being overwhelmed first by the city and then by the wide open prairies, a cantankerous (if not worse) mother in law, a husband who stands up for other people's rights as a union activist but doesn't defend his own wife and so on. Director Ellen S. Pressman subtly moves things along but still the 80 minutes feels long. Why? Because Rachel's story is essentially a static one. She journeys thousands of miles but we meet her at the start as a smart, reserved, stoic but likable woman and that's what she is at the end. The other characters are presented vividly but they too don't evolve much if at all. Still, the evening is worth it to see an actress invest so fully and successfully in a character.

#### BOOKS ON TAPE \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

It's no surprise that a fringe festival would be populated by works-in-progress, shows that are happy to be mounted and give the playwright a sense of exactly what they've got and what needs to change for the show to go to the next level. So finding a play that feels fully formed is a welcome relief. The Books On Tape department of a Barnes & Noble in New York City is the unlikely meeting spot for a string of would-be lovers. Adriane (played by the actress Jake Lipman) is an audiobook nut who not only devours books

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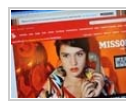
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on tape but prefers to listen to them while having sex to get herself going. Needless to say, that's off-putting, even for failed actor and professional audiobook reader Jeffrey (Nate Washburn). They meet cute and then almost get it on before her oddity becomes just a little too much and he beats a hasty retreat. They cross paths again with each other as well as Larry (Geoffrey J.D. Payne) a college student who has created a fake religion for his thesis and Donna Paige Miller (Shana Wiersum), a self-help guru who wouldn't mind a little rest and relaxation with Jeffrey before heading out on a book tour. The men fare better here, with Washburn and Payne being especially likable. Lipman has a Molly Shannon quality about her but even she can't quite bring the nutty Adriane to life. Adriane remains more of a conceit than a character. And the play ends oddly. It already had a fine finale with Larry and the self-help author. We certainly don't need the coda in which Jeffrey and Adriane spell out the rest of the story while talking directly to the audience. And their role-playing sex antics make sense. (This is what they stop in order to tell us what the play was about.) But if the show couldn't afford a spacesuit, why not change the dialogue to fit their period costumes, rather than having them dressed in bodice-ripping medieval garb while spouting lines about NASA and mission control?

#### WHAT THE SPARROW SAID \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

This play is confused and disorderly, well-acted and intriguing, messy and -- scene by scene -- carefully constructed. It's clearly the work of a young playwright bursting with talent but who hasn't found their voice yet. That playwright is Danny Mitarotondo of **The Common Tongue** theater company. It's the story of two brothers, though it was a while before I realized the two leads were in fact brothers. One is in Los Angeles taking care of their dying mother. The other is in New York checking out the lavish apartment unexpectedly left to him by a customer he waited on but barely knew. The brother in New York travels to LA -- not without adventures -- and they have a combative, air-clearing meal. One or both of them may also have a stutter or Tourette's; I can't be sure. It's a serious play with one scene highly naturalistic, the next clumsily having two actions take place at the same time, another scene vaguely absurdist and so on. But moment to moment, there is an intelligence about *What The Sparrow Said* that kept me engaged. The scene with one brother (Matthew Michael Hurley, especially appealing) giving a lift to an elderly woman and then dropping her off at a reunion by the river was oddly moving and gives a sense of Mitarotondo's ability to creative vivid characters with ease. The actors are wholly committed throughout from Kevin Mannering giving his all as the over-the-top Blaze to Ruby Ruiz in the sketchy role of Nursie. It's not a satisfying work at this stage, by any stretch. But I'm definitely going to keep an eye out for what Mitarotondo does next.

#### PAPER CUT \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

This one-woman show is fresh and clever. I wish it had more emotional punch to make it truly great. But this is a smart conceit that makes the most of the offbeat premise. Essentially, we see a secretary sitting at her desk, pining for the unseen boss who gives her impossible commands that she (usually) delivers with aplomb. Played with the sexy reserve of a Hollywood librarian by Yael Rasooly -- you know, the sort of woman who takes off her glasses and lets down her hair and is suddenly vampy -- this secretary gets caught up in a fantasy world of romance and intrigue that is enacted onstage with Rasooly seated at her desk and playing with paper cut-outs. It's silly fun, catnip for movie buffs especially as they mock Hollywood conventions from the lion's roar of MGM at the beginning to the fade out at end. Rasooly co-wrote and directed this import from Israel that proves an active imagination a la Walter Mitty and a love of movies is universal. The high point is a clever combination of show tunes that Rasooly belts out quite well, each one frantically dissolving into the next. The show itself is 50 minutes long, which is just about the right length. There's certainly nothing else like it at the festival. I wonder if they'll tell another tale this way or whether this was a one-shot conceit? I imagine the latter but never underestimate the power of puppetry. Check out this video to get a good idea of Rasooly does but be forewarned: it covers the entire story so spoilers are rife. If you like what you see, stop the video and head to the show. It's a charmer in person.



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*Books On Tape* \*\* 1/2

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*Leonard Cohen Koans* \*\*\* 1/2

*Paper Cuts* \*\*\*

*Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow* \*\* 1/2

*Rachel Calof* \*\* 1/2

*Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending* \*\*

*2 Burn* \* 1/2

*Walls and Bridges* \*\*

*What The Sparrow Said* \*\* 1/2

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

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