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Freelance writer

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FringeFest NYC Finale - Fun "Pear" and Great "Mountain"

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FringeFest NYC is winding up its encore series of the most acclaimed shows from the festival. That gave me a chance to catch up with two treats that help make this year another winner for uncovering new talent and shows with great promise. *Pearl's Gone Blue* is a musical that with work could become very special; it already has the talent. And *The Mountain Song* introduced me to the terrific company PigPen.

PEARL'S GONE BLUE *** out of ****

It's no secret that a strong cast and good story can hold an audience's attention without elaborate sets. But it's good to be reminded of that every once in a while and

FringeFestNYC does that in spades. *Pearl's Gone Blue* is a great example. A table and a few chairs plus an excellent guitarist on the side provide all the backdrop it needs to tell its story.

Seddy Pearl (Roz Beauty, well named) is a church-going schoolteacher who is ready for a little fun. She and her best friends Bell (Benja K. Thomas) and Tiny (Pamela Monroe) are out having fun when they realize the blues singer performing in their small town is Beau (Billy Eugene Jones), a handsome fellow who had left for the bright lights years ago. Beau immediately takes a shine to Seddy -- who has grown up very nicely since he last saw her -- and you might expect the usual tale of a bluesman seducing the nice girl and drawing her into trouble. Not really. *Pearl's Gone Blue* is more complicated and real than that.

Seddy is hardly a blushing wallflower (though Beauty has great fun teasing out her sensuality). Beau doesn't just waken her physical desires; he also awakens her desire to sing the blues. Everyone knows she

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has the best voice at church on Sunday. Can she cut it on Saturday night as well? Things turn dark when Seddy keeps a charm that Beau loses, a powerful talisman that contains his dreams and helps him to perform. Beau loses his mojo and Seddy starts to get stronger and more forceful. Meanwhile, her friends struggle with their own desires including an ailing sister and a dream of opening a BBQ joint.

Most of the songs in the show come out naturally as performances in a club or the casual singing among friends and are serviceable to good. The strongest factor is the easy camaraderie among the cast. You quickly accept that these three women are old friends. Act Two could use more focus. The women bicker from the start and it's not as clear as it should be that the bickering from act one has turned into bitterness and a potentially irrevocable split in act two. We should feel more strongly that the amulet is poisoning everything in their lives.

but the book by Leslie Kramer already has a great deal of heart and humor. And the songs by her and Gabriel Gordon offer the core of a solid score in the making. The direction by Julie Kramer is brisk and efficient, surely a major reason why the show feels so whole even at this stage. Casting helps a great deal, with Thomas and Monroe very strong and Jones appealing even as he becomes weaker and weaker. Tiffany Thompson does well in the dual role of a battling neighbor and an uptown blues singer. Thompson delivers her tune with just enough smoothness to convince she's a success but leaving enough room for grit from our heroine to establish who the real deal really is. It's a generous choice.

Beauty is a delight throughout. Even when she's not speaking, you can focus on her face and now exactly what Seddy is thinking and feeling. She mines the humor of the script and the darkness, without ever tipping into broad brushstrokes. She's a find. And an unexpectedly subtle finale gives the show an emotional heft that an easier, more feel-good ending would have lost. Good fun right now, but *Pearl's Gone Blue* has a lot of potential.

PIGPEN PRESENTS: THE MOUNTAIN SONG *** 1/2 out of ****

If the Avett Brothers branched out into theater, you might expect them to deliver the tunes that pepper the folk/country/Americana score of *The Mountain Song*. The theater company *PigPen* became the first troupe in history to win the overall excellence award at *FringeFest* two years in a row with this show. And no wonder, it's a one hour delight brimming with a talented cast, delightful puppetry, a sweet but sad tale delivered at just the right length and with charm to spare.

Even before the show begins you know you're in for a good time because the entire troupe is onstage diving into one rousing instrumental after another while the audience claps along. They've won us over even before the curtain rises. Then comes a tall tale about a father raising a mute daughter. He reluctantly sends her off to the big sister to learn to talk with her hands. She sends word years later that she's getting married but the details are muddled. So the father goes on a quest down the three different rivers that lead from their mountain home (his only clue is that it's taking place at the end of a river) to try and find his daughter and celebrate her happiness.

This story is told through song and puppetry. The title credits appear as clouds floating behind an illuminated screen. The daughter is seen as simply a tiny dress that one cast member manipulates. (How



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quickly our imagination adapts so that simply having the dress tilt forward or side to side can become an eager "yes" or a sad "no.") The biggest man in the world is a giant foam head held up by yet another cast member. And on and on, from a piece of folding cloth to mimic a bird to a wooden platform turning from a raft into a flying machine.

This is all delivered with ease and pleasure by the cast, all of whom are onstage for most of the show singing songs, playing instruments and diving in to turn a prop into a character at the drop of a hat. You smile from start to finish, even as the story gets a little sad, as stories sometimes do. It never hurts that the all-male PigPen players are cute as a button, either. You want to buy their CD if they had one (the songs are that good) and friend them on Facebook all at the same time.

The book could use a little tightening. And the avuncular narrator Ben Ferguson holds the stage well as a performer, handling the bulk of the show's narrative drive. But his voice might be the weakest of the bunch; he'd shine more on "The Mountain Song" if that were his main solo. But everyone from Matt Nuernberger as the dad on down handles the stage with the ease of people who belong there.

PigPen is definitely a six-man company (recent grads from Carnegie-Mellon) to keep an eye on. They are remounting last year's success *The Nightmare Story* in October. And next year they'll be bringing an all new show to Manhattan. I for one won't want to miss any of it.

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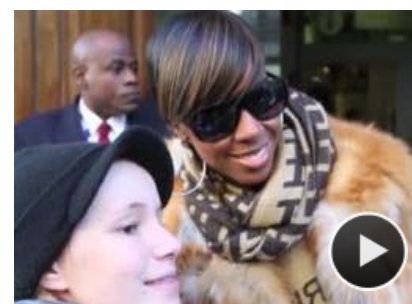
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Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of *Showbiz Sandbox*, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's [available](#) for free 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 these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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