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Theater: *Independents* Sails to Success at FringeNYC

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INDEPENDENTS *** 1/2 out of ****
THEATRE 80

The premise sounded a little jokey -- stoners hanging out and taking part in a Revolutionary War reenactment. But the moment the first song begins -- "Fare Thee Well" -- you immediately sit up straight in your seat. The

song by Stephen Feigenbaum (music) and Mark Sonnenblick (lyrics) is thoughtful and moving, an ancient-sounding lament about war and peace and trying to break away from the ties that bind. Despite modest resources, the music is nicely orchestrated, the melody catchy but with an undertone of mournfulness and the cast slowly joins in until the tune swells and catches your breath. This could be good, you think.

And it is. Easily the best show I've seen at [FringeNYC](#) this year, *Independents* is exactly why you stumble through a dozen or so shows during the fest, sometimes watching three in one day in hopes of this: a show with talent on stage, talent behind the scenes and a piece that isn't just promising but already a satisfying work, albeit with room to become even better.

Liam (Jacob Roa) is our hero, the leader of a ragtag group of just-out-of-college buddies who are living on his parents' Revolutionary War-era sailing ship. Liam's parents are dead and he wants to get his little brother out of foster care. They have a vague idea of making some money by getting customers onto their ship by offering reenactment tours. But mostly they sit around getting stoned and trying to figure out what to do about the bales of marijuana stored in the hull of their ship. They're even more amateur at drug-dealing than playing dress-up American soldiers and it's the missing Chris who holds the key to moving the pot, making some money, allowing Liam to pay off the mortgage on the ship and let everyone continue their carefree existence.

Act One is lighter as we realize Liam and his girlfriend Isabel (Summer Broyhill) are drifting apart while he and Grace (a lovely Lilli Cooper of *Spring Awakening*) are drifting together. The gang is whipped into shape by the arrival of the unpaid intern Carl (an amusing Corey Desjardins in a role that might easily have been stereotyped), a gay would-be actor passionate about getting the details of the 18th century correct. Before they know it, the group -- including heavyset butt of jokes JT (Tom Sanchez), amiable Ari (Ethan Slater, who invests his character with immense likability), man of few words Kyle (Adam Weppeler), lesbian refugee from the military Johnson (Emily Jenda, who shines on the lovely "Shelburne," another tune that sounds like it's been around for 200 years) and pill-popping partier and best pal to Liam Jaimy (Kevin Hoffman) -- is actually drawing crowds and making money. Then Chris shows up.

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Act Two is darker as Chris (Christopher Burke, bringing a nice sense of menace and darkness to show) rather predictably is in deep with drug cartels and they need to suddenly cough up \$50,000 or they're all going to be in serious danger. Toss in romantic entanglements and a bungled review to turn their rogue reenactment tour into a legitimate, licensed business and you've got yourself a show. I have no song listings, but you can hear modes [audio recordings of three of them at the show's website](#).

I will say that throughout the show the songs are consistently witty, sophisticated and hummable, ranging from sea shanties to romantic duets to the humorous "Here" sung by Jaimy. The cast is appealing from top to bottom, with director Charlie Polinger doing sterling work at managing the shifting moods and keeping the large cast moving about the tiny stage with grace and purpose. With very limited resources, the handsome musical director Ben Wexler (who also handles vocal arrangements and the orchestrations) does full justice to this very promising score.

The book is very solid, though there are certainly areas it can be tightened and improved. The subplot about Jaimy's addiction to pills is rather abrupt and pointless. It's probably the vestige of a much bigger subplot from earlier drafts and should be dropped completely. We can see Jaimy indulging too much so don't really need more than that to know he's a bit lost. They walk a fine line with the gay Carl but do a nice job ultimately of not making him too much the comic relief. (He does have the show's funniest line.) Not every character can be fleshed out completely and the actors make them wholly alive, but JT and Ari could use just a touch more backstory to explain who they are and why they're just frittering away their time like this.

The drug subplot feels too familiar, but then the book by Marina Keegan surprises you with how its handled. I'm not quite sure why just selling the boat might not be as helpful as claiming the insurance on it after an "accident" but then drug dealers like Chris don't always think straight. But once the story moves into this rather pedestrian avenue, the show pivots very nicely. Jaimy has been a one-note character of sorts (despite his addiction) but late in the show he has a monologue that is a genuine highlight and a rather bold mood stylistically, given where it falls in the show. We soon realize this isn't Jaimy talking but the words of the Revolutionary era figure he's been reading the journal of throughout. The wording doesn't quite convince as the thoughts of someone from that period, but it's a wonderful piece that Hoffman delivers superlatively.

Full credit to the lighting (Gary Sloatskiy), sound (Emily Auciello), costumes (Isabelle Simone) and set design (Brian Dudkiewicz). When a show is going well, even minor distractions prove a boon. The theater is so intimate and the cast standing offstage so nearby that you can hear the creaking of their feet on the wooden boards -- but thanks to the setting, it actually sounds like the creaking of a sailing ship and adds to the atmosphere.

Of course in a show like this you immediately dive into the credits and bios of everyone involved (something I usually avoid until the show is over). That's when I discovered the bittersweet news that *Independents* unfortunately has a *Rent*-like backstory since book writer [Marina Keegan died while working on this, her first musical](#). She was clearly a talent who made the most of every opportunity that came her way (a Yale student, she had already been published in the *New York Times* and had a short story heard on NPR). We'll never know what was lost with her early death, but this work and the talented people involved have clearly made the most of what she helped create.

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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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