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FringeNYC is an annual festival filled with new works -- plays and musicals and puppetry and one-person shows, all with dreams of catching the eye of producers and finding further life at other fringe festivals around the world (where some of these shows began) or heading to Off Broadway or even Broadway. The best new show I

saw was [Independents](#), which is reviewed here. Below is a roundup of some other highlights.

BLANCHE: THE BITTERSWEET LIFE OF A PRAIRIE DAME *** 1/2 out of ****

I first saw Blanche at the New York Musical Festival -- [here's my original, very enthusiastic review](#). It was a treat to see the show again some months later and a second visit only reinforced my initial impression about the strength of the songs and the story's overall appeal. I fear 440 Studios did not have great acoustics for a musical work (though it did have a house manager who offered succinct, original and engaging introductions for the shows he was hosting). But the quality of the piece by [Onalea Gilbertson](#) shone through again.

CITY OF SHADOWS *** out of ****

I saw this song cycle right after revisiting Blanche and they made an excellent double bill. Artist Rachael Dease drew inspiration from a series of police photographs taken in Sydney during the turn of the century (that does still refer to 1900, doesn't it? Someday soon we'll have to make clear we don't mean 2000.) She wrote a batch of story songs and then set them aside; returning to them later she wrote another batch of less detailed, specific tunes and the result is this show. Dease stands on one side of the stage with a quartet of musicians lined up on the other. Behind them flash a series of police photographs (and, I assume, other photos from the era with street scenes and the like) while Dease belts out her songs. She's a striking performer with a commanding voice and your attention is held throughout. The photos, sometimes quite graphic in their capturing of the recently dead, were mesmerizing. My favorite showed a body mostly hidden on the other side of a wall, with feet peeking out around the corner and a streak of blood showing how the body had been dragged mostly out of sight. It was an intelligent, effective performance though the songs were so general in their nature that they needed the specificity of the photos to ground the evening. Perhaps one or two of those more narrative-driven songs would have provided a better balance to the tunes. But your attention never wavered, Dease was a striking vocalist and I look forward to checking out her other endeavors down the road.

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AN INTERROGATION PRIMER *** out of ****

This show was a lifesaver at FringeNYC for me. After a rough start with four or five shows that didn't engage and a feeling of despair, my faith was restored by this solid, well-done 35 minute piece. It's based on a piece written by Mike Nowacki, a soldier who served in Iraq as an interrogator. The presentation is straightforward: actor Sean Bolger walks out and begins to talk, with merely a desk and a chair onstage to frame his lecture on how interrogation works. "You start by taking off his blindfold," he says matter of factly. In the context of this speech, when Bolger firmly shuts the door to the theater where he's speaking, it becomes a notable statement of control and isolation. As they say in the show notes, the piece is delivered in the second person, which avoids the confessional, first person stance of a memoir and the objective third person perspective of journalism. Without condemning or justifying, the show lays out the experience of interrogation as conducted by a good soldier who is trying to do a good job. Frustration, lack of preparation (thanks to instructors who have never conducted a real interrogation in their lives), confusion, boredom, anger and more all come into play. It builds to the interrogator understanding how some others might lose control and go beyond the pale, bending and breaking the rules or simply not caring about whether or not a particular person is guilty or innocent. You gain insight into the guys doing their job as well as they can and those that do not, making the abuses and inevitable failings when humans are under pressure in a war zone easier to understand. It ends with our protagonist back in the US, shadowed by the experience and not quite fitting in, maybe not ever. It's compact, trim and effective, accomplishing its objectives easily, thanks to Bolger's no-nonsense performance and sympathetic direction by the adaptor and director Eric Ziegenhagen. It comes from Chicago and when a show travels from that excellent theater town to New York, it's often a sign of good things and An Interrogation Primer is the latest example of that.

MAGDALEN *** out of ****

I admit to a bit of trepidation about seeing a one-woman show concerning the Magdalene Laundries, the workhouse run by Irish Catholic nuns that was built on the sweat and tears of whores, runaways, sexually abused and physically challenged girls and young women. These outcasts were abused by the world and then abused again by their terrible treatment in this Dickensian institution and I'd heard the stories in film (The Magdalene Sisters) and song (Joni Mitchell's album Turbulent Indigo). But good art can reinvigorate any story, no matter how familiar. Magdalen -- written and performed by Erin Layton and directed with care by Julie Kline -- has a traditional documentary feel to it. It begins in the present with a person who has purchased the property where the now infamous laundries were once located and then leaps back into time, bringing to life priests, nuns (neither villainous though not terribly likable either), the neighbors who looked down on the inmates and the girls themselves. We see a variety of women but soon focus in on one girl who was sexually assaulted by her father and in the twisted logic of the day is now unclean and an outcast. She prays daily to a statue of the Blessed Virgin Mary, goes to confession daily and yearns to become a nun of the order herself so she can be good and get into heaven. While the outlines were familiar, Layton gave the performance of the festival by embodying with ease all these

many disparate characters and making them all flesh and blood people, from a physically challenged girl to little kids who mock the girls with glee because at least there's someone in the world these poor lads with no future can look down upon. It's a solid showcase for an excellent actor.

PAPER PLANE ** 1/2 out of ****

I'm a sucker for simple theatricality of the sort embraced by 3 Sticks, the company behind this show. A ladder becomes a tall tree, a rolling metal frame becomes a train, a guy walking on buckets taped to his feet becomes a scary "bull" determined to beat up anyone attempting to ride the rails for free and so on. In this tale, a young boy whose mother died long ago discovers she was a daring performer, a wing-walker who performed at county fairs and the like. Up for adventure, the child heads off to the county fair to see another pilot who might have known his mother. Along for the ride is his best pal and another slightly older kid who is always up for adventure. They hitch a ride on the trains, evade the bulls, head to the circus, ride in a plane and generally have a scary and exciting time of it. The pleasure is all in the telling and 3 Sticks have inventive minds and some evocative tunes by Andrew Lynch that create a wistful mood. Their cast information is almost willfully uninformative so I can't be certain who did what. The handsome devil who played Hank, the best pal in the world to Joseph our hero, was especially engaging throughout in that and other minor roles, though almost all the cast was solid in their roles, including the other young pal who loved adventure. It was made very clear that Joseph wanted to head off to see the aeroplane stunt pilots. But it took me quite a while to realize the show was also suggesting that a paper plane sent aloft by the kid was also teasing him along, providing a guiding light of sorts. This became increasingly important at the finale but it wasn't clear to me that in the mythology of the show paper planes have a mind and life of their own. Maybe I missed some key lyrics in an early song but this could be spelled out quickly and simply, maybe by Joseph's father. And the paper plane he's chasing could reappear a little more often, though this all seems to be redundant since we already have motivation for his adventure. Another small point is that the "bull" who is sniffing out and tracking down Joseph feels like a plot twist; if there was more of a sense of him stalking the kids throughout, rather than just a late story reappearance, this would be more effective and create a better sense of danger. My central problem is with the performance of the actress who played Joseph. Everyone else who plays kids in the show just plays characters. Granted they're a little older but that's no reason to play a "kid," with bug-eyed reactions and little boy mannerisms that always seem to hammer home how this is a child, as opposed to a specific child. She's playing to the idea of little children and since everyone else is more naturalistic it throws off the balance of the show. Simply toning it down and trusting that the character will reveal himself as a little kid without underlining and highlighting that immaturity would work much better. Still, those songs and the general appeal of the storytelling shine through and it's a company whose work I hope to see again soon.

RATED M FOR MATURE ** 1/2 out of ****

This play by Greg Ayers has a promising setup and some very good scenes until it drops genuine drama for highly improbable and unconvincing plot twists. Mom (Jamey Hood) and stepdad Larry (Brian Munn) are worried about her teenage son Eric (Ben Hollandsworth). The school thinks he's a drug addict and they're tossing his room looking for Eric's stash when they come across a journal and realize he's deeply addicted to online gaming. With Eric failing three classes, Mom just yanks the computer out of his room, freaking out Eric so much (his clan has a massive raid planned for tonight against their arch enemies in the online game Call To Arms) that he literally throws himself at her feet weeping. She stands firm and Eric is soon an outcast even among his gamer friends, the volatile Pete (Nick Vennekotter) and hanger-on Danny (Patrick Harman). It's a story about addiction and bullying (natch) and high school and step parents, but unfortunately it becomes a thriller when Pete hatches an absurd plan to blackmail Eric's stepdad so they can run away to California. That devolves into a kidnapping and guns and a stand-off with police so the bad seed Peter (his dark home life is merely hinted at) can go truly nuts. This is a disappointing turn for a show that was fresh and believable when it stuck to reality. Ayers does a very effective job of showing the swagger and confidence Eric and his friends feel in their online world. The brief scenes of them in their virtual world are funny and effective in showing the appeal of a second chance for a newer, stronger personality. A few more moments of them escaping into that fantasy realm would have been welcome. The best scene in the show involved Eric and a counselor. Urged to just talk without any fear of judgment, Eric talks about how his friends were bullied and administrators did

nothing. The counselor nitpicks at his comments, blithely dismissing them since he wasn't involved and then again urges Eric to open up.

It's a damning moment that reveals even a well-intentioned official can let kids down. (The fact that he doesn't ask Eric if he's being bullied is telling. More hard to swallow is Eric's mom embracing the idea of rehab when she thinks the problem is drugs but scoffing at the idea of therapy, even after her son practically has a nervous breakdown over losing his computer privileges.) The less convincing their characters' actions, the less effective the actors. So the parents have the least satisfying parts. Vennekotter must shoulder the burden of Pete's wildly unconvincing evolution into unhinged lunacy, though he's good earlier on as just a pushy jerk. Harman is good in the minor role of loser among losers. Playwright Ayers has potential -- he just needs to trust his characters more and the drama of real life versus Hollywood. Above all I'll remember Rated M For Mature as a showcase for Ben Hollandsworth as Eric. He gives a subtle, empathetic, grounded performance throughout, funny in the virtual world scenes without ever making fun of his character's passion, vulnerable, sweet, and even makes you almost believe in the over-the-top plot twists towards the end. It is indeed a mature, memorable performance.

THE GREAT PIE ROBBERY ** 1/2 out of ****

This show is a genial goof, a send-up and celebration of melodramas that used to pepper the stage around the turn of the last century. The townspeople of Skunk Valley, USA are quite happy and looking forward to the annual pie-eating contest. Then the evil Vincent Von Villanueva (Mike Quirk) comes in, buying up half the town and threatening to turn their idyllic paradise into an early Las Vegas. While the villain triumphs? Will our hero Chicken Farmer John (Seth Grugle) save the day and realize shoppirl Clementine (Jennifer Bissell) is his true love? Will Junior (Doug Goldring) avoid the drudgery of life as a baker and take to the stage? Stop asking so many questions! In case you're not certain of what to do, castmembers hold up signs telling you to hiss the villain, cheer the hero, sigh over the maiden and so on. This sort of nonsense seems easy in the abstract but there's a skill to mining obvious jokes for new humor and playwright/director Ben Tostado and Playlight Theatre deliver a very promising first effort. The entire cast is game but especial note must be made of Trip Plymale as Pa Baker, whose deadpan delivery is priceless. He knows that you don't need to mug to put across a joke.

BOMBSHELTERED ** 1/2 out of ****

Four young people decide to trip acid in the bomb-shelter of one of their dads. A random radio announcement convinces them that the end of the world is nigh and a chance to start from scratch is theirs. First they just trip out for a while, which grows tiresome very quickly to watch, just as in real life. There's nothing more boring than being sober or straight in a room full of people on acid. But they soon begin a mock satire of political structures, with one person announcing he's the king of their new society, another one overthrowing the king for a communistic government, a third pushing for free elections and so on. You get a modest backstory about a potential love triangle, but this is essentially a mockery of different forms of government and how human passion for power and control and freedom can corrupt and distort almost any system. If that sounds a bit dry, you're not far off. Playwright Adam Harlan has delivered a tightly written piece that handles the shifts in moods and explicates economic theory via Monopoly money (for example) quite nicely. But there's no real story beneath the satire and spoofery, no characters to care for that change and grow or are revealed via their shenanigans. The four actors are solid throughout, tossing off the sometimes explanation-heavy text with ease. But there's too much head and not enough heart for them to bring these people wholly to life. It's telling that the finale -- in which characters give us an update on what happened to them in years to come -- is uninteresting. We don't really know them as characters so their fates feel merely random. You can't really dislike a show that warms up the audience with the second half of Bruce Springsteen's *Born To Run* album and there is care and craft on display. When Harlan grapples with characters as deftly as he handles concepts, it will be worth checking out.

SHEHERIZADE ** out of ****

This production via students at Carnegie Mellon makes a worthy addition to FringeNYC with a show that demonstrates a lot of promising talent. It tackles the familiar tale of a woman who puts off a murderous king by spinning tales that are so captivating he can't bear to kill the storyteller until he's heard the end and keeps putting off her death night after night until he falls in love and has a change of heart. Playwright Aidaa Peerzada emphasizes Sheherizade's desire to protect all the other women who would be killed by this king on their wedding nights, one after the other. And the direction by Priscila Garcia and choreography by the director of movement/artistic director Anne Marie Bookwalter keep the story flowing smoothly. Like many classic tales, this one allows actors to double and triple in various roles. But it was a mistake, I think, to allow the two central roles of Sheherizade and the king to be doubled in the same way. This lowers the tension of her fate and the drama of seeing the king slowly fall in love. Also, the cliffhanger approach to storytelling is dropped I believe after just one night, so the driving pull of the narrative is undercut as well, along with her teasing refusal to finish a tale because she's tired, forcing the king to spare her life yet again each night. None of this diminishes the solid cast. One or two minor parts are stumbled over, but the direction and choreography keep the entire production moving along nicely. It's a good showcase for some young talent.

THE DICK AND THE ROSE ** out of ****

This show with puppetry tries to make sense of how a parent could kill their own children via a story that escalates from sexual desire to marriage to kids, to annoying kids that constantly complain and bicker and moan and beg and plead until the parent(s) feel so overwhelmed and overwrought that they snap. It's not as dark as this sounds, thanks to the puckish presence of writer and director Robert Biggs as the master of ceremonies. The problem is that while intellectually it's easy to see how the scenes link

together and the show builds to a finale, in practice each section feels like a separate piece not really connected to the whole. it doesn't build emotionally even though that's the clear intent. The song in which the mother feels harangued by her kids is perhaps the most effective. Throughout there are fine touches by the multi-talented cast. (And the "ministering angels" offer attractive and multipurpose support, especially Jake Elitzer.) it's a serious effort with some evocative music that simply never quite comes to life.

STORYTIME WITH MR. BUTTERMEN ** out of ****

Homeless people in Central Park maintain their dignity and sanity by recasting classic folk tales for the modern world. So Aesop's "The Tortoise and the Hare" becomes more about how the tortoise gets soused on liquor while "The Grasshopper and the Ant" lands firmly in the camp of the grasshopper and having fun while you can. Conceived and directed by Christian De Gre with numerous writers chiming in on individual tales, *Storytime with Mr. Buttermen* has a very confused and dark trajectory that is unearned and unsatisfying. But that shouldn't obscure the fact that the talented cast, strong choreography by Paula Wilson and excellent direction by De Gre are all noteworthy. The main problem is that the modern retellings invariably fall flat or make points so banal they're hardly worth hearing. "The Emperor's New... Weapon of Mass Destruction" is against escalating military expenditures. "Pigmailman" warns that it's not nice to disdain people for their physical appearance. And "The Girl Who Cried Rape" says it's not nice to falsely accuse people of rape because of course that's wrong and then when someone else finds the courage to say they've been raped they might not be believed. But "Pigmailman" is a good example of why the show wasn't a waste of time, despite growing less interesting as it went along. The actor Nathan Winkelstein played our Christ-like mailman with verve, the song accompanying it was satisfying and the choreography and direction kept it lively. It's only the book that let this and so many other pieces down. The cast was solid throughout, though Mr. Buttermen (Anthony M. Lopez) was burdened with the most explicit messages and banal exposition so he struggled a bit. Winkelstein and Ashley C. Williams were among the many fine talents. But Justin Anselmi shone most of all. He nailed his lines throughout, mining them for humor and anger and genuine emotion. He also played a homeless person who improv'd before the show by interacting with audience members as they filed in. Few things send me running for the doors faster than improv and castmembers that interact with the audience and demand some participation. But darned if Anselmi wasn't exceptionally funny and in character. I especially enjoyed his lightning fast switches from self-deprecation to defiance and his offhanded comments were so amusing I was actually delighted to see he'd do the same schtick during the intermission. Discovering a talent like his that you want to see again in the future would make shows far less ambitious than this one worth watching.

MORMON IN CHIEF ** out of ****

This comedy by Matthew Greene is admirable in its desire to paint a complex picture of people rather

than indulging in easy satire or cheap shots at Mormons and political bloggers. However, it's ultimately so timid in its fairness that it becomes as dull as our hero, Connor (Jesse Liebman). He's a modest guy who attends the same temple as the current candidate for President. After the candidate gave a speech to his fellow faithful, Connor tweeted that the guy wants to save America from the gays and other sins. Somehow, this innocuous tweet launches a political firestorm with the candidate insisting his words were taken out of context and every media outlet in the country trying to track down this anonymous tweeter. The tweet even inspires a question at a Presidential debate in which the Mormon candidate blanks out for an eternity (10 or so seconds) while trying to answer it. Throughout all of this, Connor remains oblivious, which stretches disbelief even for a fundamentalist. He's finally tracked down by a blogger Lydia (Nicole Rodenburg), who pushes Connor for a statement but ultimately sees him as a nice if misguided guy she may disagree with politically but can't demonize personally. A side plot has Connor as the shoulder to cry on for his friend Kate (a very good Karis Danish), whose marriage is rocky and whose husband is competing for the same promotion as Connor. Will Connor apologize for accurately describing what he believes to be the candidate's position on hot-button social issues? Will he stand up for himself and possibly prevent a man he believes in from becoming President? Or is that man not worth believing in any more? And while Connor stand up for himself at work or step aside so his friend can get the promotion he wants and maybe save a marriage? None of this is as remotely interesting as it might be. Connor is bland in the extreme, a polite and friendly guy who is modest but no pushover. He's not terribly political at all and so his back and forth with Lydia on politics isn't engaging in the least. he doesn't seem like a mouse so Kate's outrageous request that he refuse a promotion so her husband can get it hardly seems like a proposal even the quiet Connor would agree to; we don't believe her marriage depends on it so very little is at stake. So there's very little drama on display here. Liebman is solid as the likable Connor; it's not his fault the character is bland and rather dull. The play is the same with Greene not really wanting to grapple with the issues at hand but merely show an even-handed appreciation for everyone's point of view. That he does, in an evenhanded, unexciting manner. The actors are generally better than the material and with confidence the playwright might be as well.

DARK HOLLOW * 1/2 out of ****

This overwrought, uninvolved staging of *Woyzeck* in the Appalachians during the Depression is filled with traditional tunes and a few originals, but the cast has no feel for these songs. The exception is Nick Mason as Andy, who delivers his solo numbers with a verve and authenticity akin to the plainspoken decency he brings to his relatively minor character.

NON-EQUITY THE MUSICAL! * out of ****

A poor showcase for actors who don't have their Equity cards that tries and fails to mine the daily travails of theater hopefuls trying to make it for humor and pathos. Emily Swan has some fun as The Monitor, the varied personalities who oversee the cattle calls that actors endure every day. But you should never dismiss someone in a bad show, because you never know. Just when it seemed the cast had nothing to offer, there was a brief sketch in which they got to audition for a kid's theater piece. Suddenly the actors who'd been asked to sing banal songs and voice platitudes came alive. Joe Donnelly was funny as the pig, Nichole Turner got a chance to do more than be sassy and Pierce Cassidy delivered an hilarious cartoon voice as one of the other farmyard animals. That's why struggling actors commit to most anything they can get cast in: you never know when the right moment with the right material can make you stand out (even in a so-so show) and help you catch the eye of a casting agent or director or playwright who might just remember you down the road. The dream lives on....

THE THEATER SEASON 2012-2013 (on a four star scale)

As You Like it (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) ****
Chimichangas And Zoloft *
Closer Than Ever ***
Cock ** 1/2
Harvey with Jim Parsons *
My Children! My Africa! ***
Once On This Island ***
Potted Potter *
Storefront Church ** 1/2
Title And Deed ***
Picture Incomplete (NYMF) **
Flambe Dreams (NYMF) **
Rio (NYMF) **
The Two Month Rule (NYMF) *
Trouble (NYMF) ** 1/2
Stealing Time (NYMF) **
Requiem For A Lost Girl (NYMF) ** 1/2
Re-Animator The Musical (NYMF) ***
Baby Case (NYMF) ** 1/2
How Deep Is The Ocean (NYMF) ** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown (NYMF) ***
Foreverman (NYMF) * 1/2
Swing State (NYMF) * 1/2
Stand Tall: A Rock Musical (NYMF) * 1/2
Living With Henry (NYMF) *
A Letter To Harvey Milk (NYMF) ** 1/2
The Last Smoker In America **
Gore Vidal's The Best Man (w new cast) ***
Into The Woods at Delacorte ** 1/2
Bring It On: The Musical **
Bullet For Adolf *
Summer Shorts Series B: Paul Rudnick, Neil LaBute, etc. **
Harrison, TX ***
Dark Hollow: An Appalachian "Woyzeck" (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Pink Milk (FringeNYC) * 1/2
Who Murdered Love (FringeNYC) no stars
Storytime With Mr. Buttermen (FringeNYC) **
#MormonInChief (FringeNYC) **
An Interrogation Primer (FringeNYC) ***
An Evening With Kirk Douglas (FringeNYC) *
Sheherizade (FringeNYC) **
The Great Pie Robbery (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Independents (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
The Dick and The Rose (FringeNYC) **
Magdalen (FringeNYC) ***
Bombsheltered (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Paper Plane (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Rated M For Murder (FringeNYC) ** 1/2
Mallory/Valerie (FringeNYC) *
Non-Equity: The Musical! (FringeNYC) *
Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Prairie Dame (FringeNYC) *** 1/2
City Of Shadows (FringeNYC) ***

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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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