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**Michael Giltz**

Freelance writer and raconteur  
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# Theater: Killer Kitson; Fairly Earnest; So-so Baitz and Interminable Ibsen

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Lots of theater to catch up on, so here we go.

**THE INTERMINABLE SUICIDE OF GREGORY CHURCH** \*\*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
[St. Ann's Warehouse](#)

I've heard about [Daniel Kitson](#) for years. He's a performer who alternates between stand-up comedy and "story shows," monologues built around a particular story or theme. St. Ann's has brought over his latest piece and it's marvelous. Yes, it's only January, but I'm certain we'll still remember this work fondly at the end of the year. How exactly a shambling fellow with a speech impediment decided he should be a performer is

probably a story worth its own show, but Kitson is a natural. It runs through January 30 so do what you must to see it.

Kitson strolls out and immediately disarms his audience. A lot might be made up, he begins, but this part is true: he was going around the UK, looking for a home to buy. At one home, Kitson stumbled on a cache of 30,000 letters written by Gregory Church, a man the estate agent was forced to admit had killed himself. Kitson didn't take the home but he did take the letters and found himself immersed in Church's life for the next two years as he worked through every letter and reply one by one.

In the very first letter, Church plans to kill himself. But when he sends out a pile of final goodbyes (often to strangers and with little or no hint that he was planning to off himself), Church unexpectedly gets some responses. A decent fellow, he takes another day to respond to those letters, which bring their own responses back again and on and on and soon enough 20 years have passed. We get to know a string of indelible characters, from the caustic fellow at the local newspaper -- who refuses to print Church's final

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statement to the world and suggests he keep living, if only so he can learn how to write decently -- to a bullied teenager to the timid bank clerk and the mysterious woman who may or may not be Church's one true love.

This is a wonderfully constructed show: if Kitson introduces a timid female bank clerk, he shows them becoming friends but just when we start to expect something more, he chides us for trying to will them into a relationship and informs us that they were and will remain merely good friends. People get older and die, some marry and move away and throughout they continue their correspondence with Church. With many documentary films this year, you walk out and wonder which part is true. But Kitson is so specific and engaging (his string of statistics about the number of letters and responses are peppered throughout) that you simply walk out wondering what happened to this character and was that one really his lost love?

When my guest wondered if Kitson had invited any of the people involved to come see the show, I pointed out that he was assuming they actually existed. He was nonplussed and almost a little annoyed at my suggestion. That's how good Kitson is and I won't miss any of his shows in the future. Another success for St. Ann's, which gets to look very clever but traveling the world and bringing the best specialized theater (like *Brief Encounter* and *Black Watch*) back to New York. Nice work if you can get it and good for them.

*What others are saying:*

**Ben Brantley of The New York Times** said, "But while this show, which won an Edinburgh Fringe First Award in 2009, has some of the satisfactions of a cozy literary mystery, it is also a vivid piece of theater."

**David Finkle of Theatermania** said, "When Kitson jaunts off-stage, he leaves a question charging the air: Has life just been proved stranger than fiction, or has fiction just been deployed to promote the wonder of life? The implied answer: Either way is terrific."

**David A. Rosenberg of Backstage** said, "This is an affectionate tour de force, amusing and poignant, revealing man's implacable desire for endurance."

**THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING EARNEST** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**American Airlines Theatre**

Oscar Wilde's masterpiece *The Importance of Being Earnest* must be one of the most indestructible comedies in history. I've never actually seen a grade school production of this show, but I imagine even that would be fairly amusing. Certainly when you have the great Brian Bedford as Lady Bracknell, you know you're in for a treat. He doesn't disappoint, landing even a single word like "Handbag!" with comic aplomb that brings down the house in this handsomely mounted **Roundabout production** (their first Wilde, astonishingly enough). Bedford's Bracknell is no panto exaggeration and this show is no out of control train that gathers steam with each increasing complication. Bedford also directed and he's made the very conscious choice to deliver a more deliberate, more genuine Earnest. The results are...interesting.

Actor Santino Fontana reaps the biggest reward from this approach. He plays Algernon, a character usually presented at breakneck pace with witticisms tumbling out of his mouth at such a frantic pace that even Algernon is a bit astonished by them. Not here. Fontana is a very smart, very self-aware, very purposefully funny Algernon and it's a pleasure to see this talented actor relish each bon mot as it occurs to him. His face is the one glowing with delight as Wilde's fantastical plot reveals itself.

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David Furr benefits less from this approach. John Worthing has fewer funny lines and his desire to be re-christened as Earnest to win the woman he loves is so silly it doesn't do to linger too much on absurd story itself. The two central female roles -- Sarah Topham and Charlotte Parry, names good enough to serve as Wilde characters in their own right -- seem even more adrift, though they come alive when they get to play off each other in Act Two.

Is it a coincidence that Act Two -- the one in which Lady Bracknell doesn't appear -- moves the swiftest and has the most comic momentum? Bedford might better serve himself as a director if he did a show in which he wasn't acting. But then, who would want Brian Bedford around and not have him act? He's delicious as Bracknell. But then those pros Dana Ivey and Paxton Whitehead make so little impression in their roles that you realize how little impact this Earnest truly has. So a great showcase for Fontana and great fun for Bedford. That's not bad, but when you're talking about a show as flawlessly funny as this one, that's not quite enough, either.

*What others are saying:*

**Charles Isherwood of The New York Times** said, "This magnificent gorgon, "a monster, without being a myth," as the horrified Jack describes her at one point, has perhaps never been more imperious, more indomitable -- or more delectably entertaining -- than in Mr. Bedford's brilliant portrayal, the highlight of this effervescent revival."

**David Finkle of Theatermania** said, "This new Broadway mounting, directed by and starring Brian Bedford, is as nearly perfect as it gets."

**Elizabeth Vincentelli of the New York Post** gave it three out of four stars and said, "Bedford's straightforward approach as an actor is slightly less effective when he directs. This "Being Earnest" is like a big, comfortable Cadillac: You may not get brisk accelerations or unexpected flair, but the show has old-fashioned good looks and rides smoothly."

**Joe Dziemianowicz of the New York Daily News** gave it 3 1/2 out of 5 stars and said, "Though the new Broadway revival of Oscar Wilde's satire isn't quite a nonstop delight -- it takes too long to rev up -- it makes for an enjoyable evening."

**Jeremy Gerard of Bloomberg** gave it 2 out of 4 stars and said, "The uneven cast is brightened by two other fine veterans, Dana Ivey and Paxton Whitehead, as the dour Miss Prism and the befuddled Reverend Chasuble. They add the dose of satire the production otherwise lacks."

**David Sheward of Backstage** said, "Highly stylized and sleekly staged, this is probably the funniest and sharpest production of the comedy, a favorite on regional and community stages, I've ever seen."

**OTHER DESERT CITIES** \*\* out of \*\*\*\*

**Lincoln Center**

Old-fashioned or stodgy? The latter, I'm afraid. The new Jon Robin Baitz play is shamelessly traditional: a powerful family with many secrets comes together over the holidays. Stories are told, recriminations are exchanged and of course secrets are revealed. Other Desert Cities has a patina of politics -- the parents Stockard Channing and Stacey Keach are Reaganites while the kids are "rebellious" tv producers and writers -- but you can substitute business for politics and the idea is the same. Resentful kids, stone-faced parents and an explosion where the Truth comes out.

In this show, the truth isn't just coming out, it's being published: daughter Elizabeth Marvel has come home with the manuscript for her new book. After years of writer's block, she's turned to the memoir and talks about the sad dark heart of the family: the oldest son became a black sheep who fell in with radicals in the 1970s and was implicated in a bombing that took the life of a veteran. That son disappeared forever and the parents -- ostracized for a time by their right-wing "friends" -- never discuss it. But by God, they'll discuss it now!

Thrown into the mix is the aunt (Linda Lavin) who used to partner with Channing on a string of



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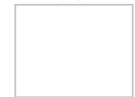
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screenplays with a Gidget-like heroine but has collapsed in her personal life and is now taking shelter with people whose politics she despises.

*Other Desert Cities* is so conventional, it's hard to say more about it than a shrug of the shoulders. Memoirs are so commonplace it hardly seems shattering to know Marvel has written one. On the other hand, it's not so absurd for her parents just to ask her to wait until they've died before hitting the talk show circuit to make hay out of the most painful moment in their lives, is it? That's the central problem here: no one is particularly good or bad and none of the "shocking" revelations really changes that for us. So other than a few peppery lines of dialogue and a few outbursts of genuine emotion, very little occurs other than the doling out of information to the audience that some or all of the characters have known all along.

Stockard Channing is a great actress and lovely woman but she has apparently given in to the fears of so many actresses and is now limited mostly to that sterling voice to deliver her performances. Luckily, it remains a formidable weapon. Linda Lavin as her sister has the lines and character-rich face an actor of her skill deserves and makes the most of them. It's a pity her role is so slight she can't do more than be a charming, irascible presence. The bombshell about Lavin's character is so banal, it barely registers with anyone.

Stacey Keach has the show's one heartfelt moment when he tells his beloved daughter that he's not sure he'll ever be able to love her ever again. In a boulevard drama of the sort that Broadway used to churn out regularly, this is such a genuine bolt of feeling that we're almost thrown off. The children are a mixed lot with Marvel having the much harder task; she uses her voice to dramatic effect so many times you can feel the wheels turning as she tries to create a full character. Thomas Sadoski is a truth-teller as the remaining son, but his dialogue is so crammed full of cursing that he just seems like Baitz's outlet for all the profanity he can't deliver on ABC with *Brothers & Sisters*. That show is quite similar to this: great cast, silly plots and enough talent to go around that every once in a while it lands a punch. Just not enough for a knockout or even a solid evening of theater.

What others are saying:

**Ben Brantley of the New York Times** said, "The only problem with the gorgeously acted Lincoln Center Theater production of "Other Desert Cities," Jon Robin Baitz's seriously satisfying new play, is that you probably need to see it five times. That's because there are five members in the cast of this ripping family drama of politics, domestic and otherwise, and you never want to take your eyes off a single one of them."

**Joe Dziemianowicz of the New York Daily News** gave it 4 1/2 out of 5 stars and said, "Keenly observed and immensely entertaining."

**Jeremy Gerard of Bloomberg** said, "Baitz has written a bravely old-fashioned drama packed with much yelling, many convenient revelations and searing confrontations. Staged at New York's Lincoln Center Theater with finesse by Joe Mantello, the evening recalls an era made defunct by television. Yet "Other Desert Cities" has the scent of truth about how families work, and don't work."

**Erik Haagensen of Backstage** said, "for anyone who has ever complained that they don't write 'em like that anymore. Richly dramatic and keenly observant, it's a hugely satisfying mixture of the political and the personal, grandly acted by a brilliant ensemble of five under Joe Mantello's faultless direction."

**Dan Bacalzo of Theatermania** said, "There could not be a better cast than the one assembled for Jon Robin Baitz's world premiere play, *Other Desert Cities*, at Lincoln Center's Mitzi Newhouse Theater. Stockard Channing, Elizabeth Marvel, Stacy Keach, Linda Lavin, and Thomas Sadoski all deliver masterful performances in director Joe Mantello's finely modulated production."

**JOHN GABRIEL BORKMAN** \* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**Brooklyn Academy of Music**

I saw a production of *John Gabriel Borkman* at the National in London with Paul Scofield, Vanessa Redgrave and Eileen Atkins, about as starry a cast as one could hope for. It was dreadfully dull. Now I've seen this production with Alan Rickman, Fiona Shaw and Lindsay Duncan. It is faint praise to say this show was not as laborious as that one from 1996. And I'm beginning to think the problem lies not with the shows but with the play. Ibsen's masterpiece of course is *A Doll's House*. That's followed by *Hedda Gabler*. I've even seen a solid production of *Brand* with Ralph Fiennes. *An Enemy of the People*, *The Master Builder*, *Peer Gynt*. All have been done and done passably well. But *John Gabriel Borkman* is a hard nut to crack: its tiresome characters simply lash at one another in expected ways and then it's over.

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This production at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) directed by James Macdonald certainly milks more humor out of the play than one normally finds. When the son that embodies the hopes and desires of the entire Borkman clan appears, he is ping-ponged between them to amusing effect at one point. "Come with me!" pleads his mother, his aunt, and his father with increasingly frenzied need.

But that modest success means the pathos and pain is all the harder to summon in the scenes to come. The set by Tom Pye works well for the indoor scenes: the stage is filled with mounds of snow, like a cold, desolate and surreal desert strewn with a grandfather clock, chairs and other unexpected items. But when the story moves out doors, suddenly those very same piles of snow seem as thuddingly obvious as the gusts of wind that thunder in from offstage and the clanging sounds of doom.

Marty Rea is suitably hapless as the son they yearn to control and Cathy Belton is vampish as the divorced woman who cynically woos him away. Duncan is a tad too languid as the sister who wants to adopt the boy for her own though she sparks a bit when paired with Shaw. Rickman is the most adrift here, with that sonorous voice leaving him stranded all alone making music that no one else can hear. They amount to four different performances in four different productions, none of them quite ringing true with the text. Only Shaw seems to be acting in the play that Ibsen wrote, her fierce bitterness slapping us awake at various moments.

Obviously, we'll see all these actors in better shows to come. But another production of *John Gabriel Borkman*? That prospect begins to freeze the heart almost as much as Ibsen intended his play to do.

*What others are saying:*

[Ben Brantley of The New York Times](#) said, "I'm not so sure about the enduring power of "John Gabriel Borkman," at least not on the basis of the emotionally unconvincing, erratically enjoyable interpretation."

[Elizabeth Vincentelli of the New York Post](#) gave it 3 1/2 out of 4 stars and said, "Visceral, stirring and visually sumptuous."

[Andy Probst of Theatermania](#) said, "And director James Macdonald's uneven new production, which originated at Ireland's Abbey Theater, boasts two powerful and often frightening turns from British stars Lindsay Duncan and Fiona Shaw. When the two actresses share the stage, the production not only sparks with unexpected humor, but brilliantly catches fire."

[David Sheward of Backstage](#) said, "Even in a production as exemplary as the Abbey Theatre's taut rendition, which features a muscular new English version of the script by Frank McGuinness and high-wattage performances from the stellar likes of Alan Rickman, Lindsay Duncan, and Fiona Shaw, there were audience giggles at Ibsen's plot excesses. Plus the play concludes with a dragged-out denouement in a blinding snowstorm. But director James Macdonald and his more-than-capable cast keep the soap operatics to a minimum, emphasizing the white-hot passions amid the frozen landscape."

\*\*\*\*\*

*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 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 the shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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