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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Four new show from [NYMF, the New York Musical Theatre Festival](#), ranging from promising to very good indeed.

GHOSTLIGHT ** 1/2 out of ****

CYCLOPS: A ROCK OPERA * out of ****

JACK PERRY IS ALIVE (AND DATING) * 1/2 out of ****

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

GHOSTLIGHT ** 1/2 out of ****

SIGNATURE THEATRE

Some shows at the [New York Musical Theatre Festival](#) are scrappy little fellows delighted to be onstage. Others come packed with talent and clearly have their sights set on the Great White Way. That's certainly the case with *Ghostlight*, an ambitious show co-directed and with book, music and lyrics by Matthew Martin & Tim Realbuto.

It tells the very familiar story of a fresh-faced girl from the heartland who makes the Ziegfeld Follies on her first audition and soon finds herself in a whirlwind of approaching fame, backstage jealousy and amorous attention from the very married Mr. Ziegfeld himself.

The very lengthy first act manages to be both long and a little thin -- we've seen this story so many times before it almost seems surprising how dragged out they make it feel. Daisy Egan nails the role of a

trouper with ease in the opening number. We have to take on faith that she befriends the new girl Olive (Rachael Fogle) and has a right to feel betrayed when Olive swiftly moves past her. Despite minimal dialogue to get this across, Eagan does it.

The "Girls Of The Night" number feels a little anachronistic -- Kander & Ebb long before its time -- but Fogle sings nicely and looks the part as an ingenue whom Ziegfeld (a very good Michael Hayden) rescues from his rooftop revue (a thinly disguised brothel, as seen here) and puts her into his latest Broadway show. Fanny Brice (Kimberly Faye Greenberg) has seen it all before and tries to warn the kid that Ziegfeld goes through chorus girls quicker than he goes through clean shirts. But he says it's different this time and maybe it is.

Rachel York pops in as his suspicious wife Billie Burke but Olive can't help herself. In a typically inconsistent manner, the sweet Olive takes to the role of mistress with ease, which doesn't track with what we know about her (or even what we learn later about her past). When she complains to Ziegfeld, it's not because Olive is wracked with guilt and knows the affair is wrong and won't last. No, it's with the usual complaint of a mistress that her lover is spending too much time with his wife.

The unlikely source of wholesome romance for Olive is -- of all things -- the movie star Jack Pickford (solid Matt Leisy). The show could make more of this amusing contradiction (he's a glamorous movie star who comes across as a farm boy who just wants a gal and a white picket fence) but doesn't. Olive becomes bitter and cynical and cruel and eventually a movie star herself.

It's impossible to discuss the show without talking about Act Two, which means a major plot twist must be revealed.

SPOILER

Finally, at the end of the first act, she dies. It's staged rather clumsily, so it's not really clear that she died or that it might be a suicide. All of Act Two takes place in a shadowy netherworld. We quickly realize Olive is dead (other characters who leave the stage walk in a stately manner behind a scrim across the back of the theater, for one). She has to make peace with everyone in her life before she can move on to the afterlife. It's stagy and obvious and not terribly effective, since Olive doesn't really seem to come to any particular understanding. In essence, she watches while other characters have their moment in the spotlight until an obscure insight sets her free. Though dramatically inert, the Second Act does boast stronger songs.

SPOILER END

Overall, the show created a lavish aura on a small budget, ably assisted by the excellent costumes of Michelle Eden Humphrey (who only flags on a chorus boy with high socks and exposed leg that just seems poorly done, even if it is accurate for the time). It benefits tremendously from the talented cast they've assembled. Fogle is a lovely presence. Hayden really makes the most of an Act One breakdown in song that echoes his early triumph in *Carousel*. It's the show's emotional peak. York's British accent is suspect to say the least, but she too shines with her big Act One number "The Destruction/He Laughs At My Jokes." Greenberg has perhaps played Brice one too many times or just suffers from poor dialogue. Eagan has too little to do but does it well, especially in her second act duet with Fogle. Leisy mines "That's How I'll Remember You" in the second act for everything its worth.

They have enough plot for two shows, all of it overly familiar. Olive's innocence to stardom and cynicism is just too telegraphed for us to enjoy. The creators undoubtedly cherish the bold Second Act, but it lies flat emotionally. Dramatic re-thinking or somehow making that conceit work will mean a lot of effort, not to mention tightening and yet adding enough detail to the main story to make it seem fresher than it does. Happily, they have a cast on hand that can make anything they do seem better than it is.

CYCLOPS: A ROCK OPERA * out of **** **47th STREET THEATRE**

Nothing pales more quickly than an attempt to be "outrageous." This musical presents a rock band composed of satyrs who tell the story of Odysseus as he lands on an island with a cyclops and must defeat the monster so he can escape and continue on his lengthy journey home. The band is amusingly introduced by their MC Silenus (director Louis Butelli, doing his best Tom Waits). They wander onstage bleating every once in a while to amusing effect. But a little bleating goes a long way. They keep it up throughout the entire show, bleating in the midst of almost every bit of dialogue in the hope it will remain funny.

Odysseus (Chas Libretto -- great name! -- who appropriately co-wrote the book with Butelli and

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contributed to the lyrics) is a rather passive fellow in this telling. Libretto has one idea as an actor -- a mock, heroic pose -- and repeats it throughout. Finally we get the cyclops Polyphemus (Jayson Landon Marcus, who co-wrote the music and lyrics with lead guitarist Benjamin Sherman). He's a *Rocky Horror* wannabe who hopes to titillate us with his naughty demeanor, but it's a bore, thanks to songs that don't deliver.

The entire show strives for outrage and thinks any sort of transgressive action is inherently funny. When they joke about gang-raping Helen Of Troy and how she's a whore ("More For The Whore," the show's strongest melody by far), you can literally feel the audience turn against them. The same idea delivered with wit and verve could work in *The Book Of Mormon*. But stated so bluntly and baldly, it just feels sophomoric and even misogynistic. (The entire show takes potshots at everyone and everything so in context, the comment isn't misogynistic. Nonetheless, it's painfully unfunny here.)

The women who serve as a Greek chorus (Lauren Augarten, Nicole Flannigan, and Madeleine Hamer) have a lot of fun and even create a sense of theatricality in the opening moments. But the middle school sense of humor soon pales even if the tight band - led by Sherman's excellent guitar work -- does its best to rock out.

JACK PERRY IS ALIVE (AND DATING) * 1/2 out of ****
MCGINN/CAZALE THEATRE

It's such a harmless, inoffensive little show, you almost hate to point out how uninteresting it is. Jack Perry (played convincingly by...Jack Perry) is a gay man living in New York. It's been six months or even longer since he's been on a date and Jack's best friends (Melissa Joyner as his bestest friend and Josh Sauerman as her hubby) push him into creating an online profile on a dating website. You might reasonably expect this to lead to Jack going on a series of blind dates. But in fact the online dating is completely dropped, and doesn't even become a punchline at the end (what, no reference to Jack having 20 people asking him out at the finale?).

Instead, Jack gets an oddly vague text message from a number he doesn't recognize. That seems to be from an old flame urging Jack to meet at their favorite spot. Urged on by said best pal (and his other friends, the happy gay couple played by Charles Baskerville and Jake Loewenthal), Jack goes traipsing around the city to meet this person, rather than insisting on them identifying themselves.

The show pretends to dismiss movie cliches like the meet-cute or the hero who is handsome and desirable but somehow alone. Of course, it subverts them all -- or rather, embraces. Subverts is too strong a word for this modest one-act show. Jack is supposed to be so stuck in a dateless rut that his friends take drastic action. But then he spends the entire night bumping into one ex after another. Jack isn't socially challenged; he's just taking a break from a very healthy sex life.

But what about the songs? Sadly, they are just as generic as the jokes. Each number sort of rambles on, without a strong chorus or distinctive lyric to help you distinguish one tune from another.

Perry and Joyner in particular create a believable sense of chemistry as childhood best friends. But without good songs to power the story (the book and lyrics are by Harrison David Rivers & Daniella Shosan and the music is by Julia Meinwald) there isn't much an actor can do.

BLANCHE: THE BITTERSWEET LIFE OF A WILD PRAIRIE DAME *** 1/2 out of ****
47th STREET THEATRE

What a treat. I walked out of this musical and [bought the lavishly illustrated CD](#) for \$20. If you knew how broke I was, you'd realize what a compliment that purchase revealed. I was about to tell friends to check it out, when I realized Blanche only had three performances at the festival, with the final show taking place literally minutes after I had seen it. It's a shame such a distinctive piece should be seen so briefly in New York. Here's hoping it returns.

Writer, creator and star Onalea Gilbertson stumbled across a book of her grandmother's photographs. That drew out her grandmother Blanche, who began to tell stories from her life. Gilbertson dug deeper, interviewing her grandmother and taping the results. Then she interviewed her grandfather for his perspective, including his painful memories of World War II that he'd never really discussed before.

The result is this song cycle, delivered with economy and precision on a simple set. Gilbertson and three musicians are on stage. A clothes line is hung across the back, with various garments pegged to it, including a large white bedsheet that doubles as a screen. Video is displayed on it at the start and the end, with photographs of Blanche and her family and friends appearing on it throughout. We hear the



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recorded voice of Blanche discussing this or that event for a minute and then the band onstage dives into a delicate, penetrating, captivating song.

Scenes are never quite acted out. But bandmembers stand in for the men in her life with easy authority, whether a winning young fellow who never got around to asking Blanche to marry him, the husband who died tragically or the husband back from the war and feeling distant and cold and drawn to drink for a while. Above all, there's Gilbertson, singing a distinctive group of songs about her grandmother's life. They were written mostly by her, with interludes and the music for two songs and arrangements by her and Jonathan Lewis & Morag Northey.

The songs have a plainspoken directness that is wonderfully effective. A typical passage goes like this: "He said Bill starved to death, while/ Del bought the groceries/ He said Bill froze to death.../ He said -- Bill was dead." It's unvarnished, but paired with the right music and Gilbertson's marvelous vocals, it's catchy and memorable and funny and true. You think of Van Dyke Parks or Randy Newman for the songs' Americana roots and perhaps Joni Mitchell for their emotional acuity.

Blanche's story is not wildly unusual or strange: Ronnie was her first love, she worked on the farm of a family when money was tight and fell hard for Bill Gilbertson and his motor bike. He died tragically and Woody brought the bad news...and stayed to woo Blanche in his own sweet time and marry her himself. But every element is precise, every passage is focused and the cast devoted to the work. The modest exception is the post-war song "Scorched Earth," the one tune that is vaguer and less rooted in specifics than the rest. But the rest -- from first to last -- is very strong indeed. It's a simple story beautifully realized. I'd love to see it again and can't wait to see her next project. Until then, at least I have the CD.

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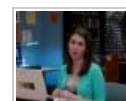
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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