

August 29, 2012

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## NYMF 2012 Roundup #3: Homelessness and *Re-Animator* the Musical!

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*This is the third in a series of roundups covering shows appearing in the New York Musical Theatre Festival, or NYMF. Every year I attend as many shows as I can and invariably see one or two that will rank among the best of the year, as well as discovering some new talented performers and behind the scenes artists I'll*

want to keep an eye on in future productions. Go to the [NYMF](#) website for more info on inexpensive tickets.

[RE-ANIMATOR THE MUSICAL](#) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

[REQUIEM FOR A LOST GIRL](#) \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*

[RE-ANIMATOR THE MUSICAL](#) \*\*\* out of \*\*\*\*

[THE PEARL ON 42ND ST.](#)

Here is a ready for Off Broadway crowd-pleaser complete with a pre-sold title, a strong cast and a "splash zone" in the first four rows where audience members can happily don ponchos so the copious amounts of blood and other fluids that are sprayed from the stage can be enjoyed to maximum effect.

*Re-Animator* was a key horror film in the comic wave that included Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead 2* and other gleefully goofy fare. Director Stuart Gordon has returned to his earliest success with pleasure, tweaking the book he co-wrote and helming this musical to pitch it at a wider audience. The movie's most infamous moment (involving a re-animated head and a sex act) is still present but more suggestive than outrageous and the rest of the violence is actually kind of sweet since it's done with old-fashioned theater tricks and all for laughs. Daring parents can take older kids without fear, as long as they're not embarrassed by a lights-out sex scene (lots of silly moaning) and buckets of blood spilled purely for the heck of it.

Dan (Chris L. McKenna) is a dutiful med student in love with the daughter of the dean (George Wendt of *Cheers*). He's a caring physician in the making until his new roommate turns out to be the obsessed Herbert West (a pitch perfect Graham Skipper). When Herbert isn't accusing their teacher Dr. Hill (Jesse Merlin) of plagiarism, he's down in the basement trying to bring dead flesh back to life...and succeeding!

The tone is mock serious from the very beginning, with a functional if not overly imaginative set by Laura

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**Bill Moyers**  
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Fine Hawkes serving as a home, hospital, lab, morgue and so on with minimal effort. No one really cares since the main focus is to spray blood, pass around a squishy brain among the audience, camp it up by being deadly serious and generally have a messy, silly time.

The songs by Mark Nutter are all functional as well, just like the set. They move the plot along, never wholly transcending their silly roots but never slowing things down either (no mean feat in a swift story like this). Truly by the end there is less than meets the eye here. Look no further than Joss Wheedon's (not him again!) *Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog* for a silly premise that can find genuine emotion. There's not a whit of genuine emotion here, but since they're really not trying for any you hardly miss it. If you go looking to see *Re-Animator The Musical* and hope for lots of blood and gore, you'll be satisfied.

The main reason is Gordon's light touch and an excellent cast that elevates the material and turns what is essentially a forgettable romp into a pleasing if forgettable romp. You won't remember much of anything an hour after it's over, but the cast makes the evening quite fun. Wendt is game in his smaller role and Merlin is very good indeed as the nefarious Dr. Hill. Skipper brings a geeky sexiness to West that could have been exploited further but he's focused and mad, mad, mad I tell you.

The secret weapons here are the two romantic leads, Dan and Megan ([Rachel Avery](#)). They shoulder the sort of bland roles that usually fail to make an impression since the bad guys get to have all the fun and chew up the scenery. But McKenna and Avery actually create genuine and compelling characters of a sort in the midst of this goofiness. Instead of being boring time-killers until the next baddie can rant and rave, they actually fill the stage with two interesting people that held your interest. Since the guys next to them were usually the undead, the semi-dead and the stark, raving mad, that's saying something.

Beyond the songs, Nutter's score is appropriately spooky and the lighting and (messy) special effects are all enjoyable low tech and effective. You know what to expect when going to see something called *Re-Animator The Musical*. How often can you see *Rocky Horror* anyway? As long as you don't expect any more, you'll be fine. And wear an old shirt if you plan on sitting in the Splash Zone.

**REQUIEM FOR A LOST GIRL** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**THE THEATER AT ST. CLEMENT'S**

If good intentions created great theater, *Requiem* would be a Pulitzer Prize winner. Happily, this "Chamber Musical About Homelessness" has more going for it than good intentions, namely an interesting hybrid of a score and some excellent directorial touches by Doug McKeag.

It is essentially a memorial service to the memory of a girl lost to the streets, a girl that the show's author of book and lyrics [Onalea Gilbertson](#) knew growing up. Gilbertson created *Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame*, [one of my favorite shows of 2011](#). That too was a "found" piece in a way, since Gilbertson based it on interviews with her grandmother. So this show -- which features a chorus of people who've dealt with homelessness and contains original poetry and raps by them alongside the more conventional songs Gilbertson has composed -- feels very much in the same vein.

Given her track record, I ventured to see it, despite the vague, afterschool special vibe a description of the show might rouse. I really should know better since my [late aunt Peggy Ann Walpole founded Street Haven](#), a series of halfway houses and transitional homes in Canada for women coming off the streets or out of prison. It was her life's work and I know well the many lives she touched and how varied and rich their stories were. She began her work in 1965 in Toronto, while this show has its roots in Calgary and Canada's largest homeless shelter. The cast includes people from there as well as cast members from [Covenant House](#), [Henry Street Settlement](#), and [Fountain House](#) here in New York City. The details change over the years but in their broad outlines, the stories are depressingly the same. Here's a glimpse



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HUFFPOST'S BIG NEWS PAGES

of an earlier production with different staging and some different cast members as well.



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The show is a memorial service with a little poetry slam tossed in for good measure. It's a fragile, delicate work, with Gilbertson's lyrics and the music of musical director Marcel Bergmann diving into the classical realm before butting up against, say, a rap about the streets. Even when the performers are raw and unvarnished and their sentiments blunt, the sheer desire of them to be heard can be powerful. Yes, it feels as much like therapy or an AA meeting at times, but anyone who has ever attended one knows the powerful emotions they can dredge up. To add even more into this disparate mix, you have Kayla Henry dancing throughout in choreographed movements created by Odette Heyn. If this sounds like a grab bag, it is.

The skeletal structure, however, is that memorial service. Gilbertson begins by remembering a girl she knew growing up, a very fast runner she managed to beat once in a key race. Later, she saw a newspaper story about this girl beaten to death after living on the streets. The show imagines (or perhaps draws on the facts of the girl's life) to show how this particular person was running away from an abusive father. The Mother (sung well by an expressive Elizabeth Stepkowski-Tarhan) struggles with her guilt. Yes, she left her husband... again and again and again, because of course she also came back. And that cost her her daughter.

These reflections about a friend lost to homelessness are modest and only returned to briefly. Still I'd shave them away even more -- less is better here since the show is more powerful when it's about people dealing with homelessness, not about how others are moved by their plight.

Director McKeag's song about a violent john preying on that homeless teenage girl ("Something For The Children") deals in too familiar territory to shock. But his staging of much of the show is key to its success. The chorus is often in movement, standing up by ones and twos, moving this way and that, always to startling effect. It comes to a climax during the show's most indelible moment, the song "Why Us," a question that begins plaintively and becomes passionate and then angry and finally defiant. If this shows gives voice to people dealing with homelessness, that voice comes out loud and clear right here. More impolite rabble rousing may not seem appropriate at a requiem, but it certainly created the work's most exciting moment.

NOTE: Gilbertson's *Blanche* is being performed as part of this year's NYC FringeFest in August, so you have another chance to see it. In a happy coincidence, Rachel Avery (the female lead in *Re-Animator*), is also the talented director of *Blanche* both last year and in its current incarnation.

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

*As You Like it* (Shakespeare In The Park w Lily Rabe) \*\*\*\*

*Chimichangas And Zolofit* \*

*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

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 is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review.

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