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Michael Giltz
Freelance writer and raconteur

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Theater: Robin Williams, Yes; Bengal Tiger, No

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BENGAL TIGER AT THE BAGHDAD ZOO ** out of **** RICHARD RODGERS THEATRE

Clearly, playwright Rajiv Joseph is a talent. Earlier this season, his show *Gruesome Playground Injuries* played Off Broadway. While not emotionally involving, it was cleverly constructed and inspired top work from everyone involved. His new drama *Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo* was shortlisted for the Pulitzer Prize after world premiering in Los Angeles. And now it's opening on Broadway with Robin Williams as the tiger.

But he's still finding his way as an artist; his plays feel technically proficient but not burning with desire to tell

this particular story or reveal *that* particular character. Joseph's main driving force at the moment seems to be the understandable desire simply to be a playwright. It's not that Joseph is showing off. In fact, his flashier conceits are often the most effective, most theatrical parts of his shows. But he's yet to find the rich emotional vein that will allow him to combine his obvious skill with insight and heart. It will come.

Bengal Tiger begins with a bang. Williams is a tiger being guarded by two soldiers after the invasion of Iraq -- Tom (Glenn Davis) and not-so-bright Kev (Brad Fleischer). The tiger mocks the soldiers and talks to the audience but the soldiers only hear its growls. Tom thinks it's hungry and foolishly offers a piece of food, only to have the tiger snap off his hand. Kev kills the tiger, but that doesn't stop Williams from

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talking: He starts to haunt Kev day and night.

Soon, the stage is crowded with ghosts. The tiger is haunted by a little girl who had half her face blown off and keeps crying. Kev is haunted by the tiger and then starts to haunt Tom himself. Tom somehow gets reassigned to duty even though he's missing one hand. Tom's interpreter is really a gardener, an artist, who always makes the mistake of working for the tyrants.

First the interpreter Musa (a fine Arian Moayed) was a gardener for Uday Hussein, ignoring the brutal way the Husseins held power in exchange for the chance to sculpt beautiful topiary hedges in the shapes of animals, like an elephant and a giraffe. Musa's little Eden of a garden is destroyed when he brings his little sister to see the garden and she's raped and killed by Uday. Uday was killed by the Americans but haunts Musa and urges him on to violence. Instead, Musa works for the Americans, who loot his country of trinkets and force him to interpret requests for sex between soldiers and young prostitutes.

Everyone is troubled and unhappy and soon most everyone is addressing God, quite loudly and vociferously, if not exactly in an original manner. They're certainly not the first people to ask God how he could allow a world in which sad and terrible things happen. The second act in particular is filled with existential mutterings and rather heavy-handed symbolism, like a gold toilet seat that one person clutches to himself in the middle of the desert, even as he's slowly dying. Here and elsewhere, *Bengal Tiger at the Baghdad Zoo* echoes everything from *Waiting For Godot* to Camus to the excellent film *Three Kings*.

The cast does its best under the circumstances. Fleischer has some fun when his dim-witted soldier is suddenly imbued with knowledge and insight (not a great thing, apparently) after dying, getting some laughs out of his desire to imagine a friendship between himself and Tom on one hand and dashing off Arabic and philosophical nuggets on the other. Their best scenes come early -- the opener and a later scene in a hospital where Tom just wants his gold-plated pistol back and Kev is hurt to realize Tom wasn't really coming to see how the mentally unraveling Kev is doing. It's a rare moment where characters are simply allowed to react to one another with normal desires and frustrations, rather than voice vague, existential doubts.

Williams is solid as the tiger, a tricky role that forces him to hold the stage alone and rarely get to play off another actor the way he did in the acclaimed revival of *Waiting For Godot*. It's restrained work, by and large, with any stand-up energy (notably at the beginning of the second act) injected merely to support the play, not hijack it.

Unlike the stellar work done on *Grotesque*, this show is not helped by the production. The direction of Moises Kaufman feels leaden, with long pauses between lines and the entrances and exits handled in a prosaic manner. The set by Derek McLane feels heavy and unimaginative, with a raised platform jutting out awkwardly on one side to no good effect. A few hints at the beauty of Arabic art and architecture are good (like the tiled floor and some nice screens) but when we're meant to be in a desert with a blasted landscape, it's just a dark flat world with a modest crag or two in the distance. It seems to be nowhere and not a symbolic NOWHERE either.

It's good to see a new artist exploring and striving and pushing boundaries and encouraged at every turn.



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it will be even better when flesh and blood characters are at the heart of his work and not just talent searching for something to say as fruitlessly as the people and animals who wander the stage searching for a sign of God.

THE 2010-2011 THEATER SEASON (ratings on a four star system)

Angels in America revival at Signature *** out of ****
Arcadia with Billy Crudup *** 1/2
Bengal Tiger At The Baghdad Zoo **
Between Worlds/Entre Mundos * 1/2
Beautiful Burnout at St. Ann's Warehouse **
Blood From A Stone ** 1/2
The Broadway Musicals Of 1921 at Town Hall ***
Devil Boys From Beyond **
The Diary Of A Madman with Geoffrey Rush at BAM ***
Double Falsehood **
The Dream Of The Burning Boy ** 1/2
Driving Miss Daisy **
Elf *
Elling **
A Free Man Of Color ** 1/2
Gatz ***
Ghetto Klown ***
Good People with Frances McDormand **
The Grand Manner **
The Great Game ***
Gruesome Playground Injuries ***
The Hallway Trilogy: Nursing **
The Hallway Trilogy: Paraffin ***
The Hallway Trilogy: Rose ***
How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying ***
The Importance Of Being Earnest ** 1/2
The Interminable Suicide Of Gregory Church *** 1/2
John Gabriel Borkman * 1/2
La Bete ** 1/2
Les Miserables ***
Lombardi **
Macbeth with John Douglas Thompson **
The Merchant Of Venice *** 1/2
Middletown ***
The Milk Train Doesn't Stop Here Anymore *
Mistakes Were Made ** 1/2
Nixon In China *** 1/2
The New York Idea **
The Nightingale and Other Short Fables at BAM ***
Other Desert Cities **
Our Town with Helen Hunt ***
The Pee-wee Herman Show ***
The Road To Qatar *
Room ***
The Scottsboro Boys ****
Small Craft Warnings zero stars
Three Sisters (w Maggie Gyllenhaal and Peter Sarsgaard) *** 1/2
Timon Of Athens at Public with Richard Thomas ***
The Whipping Man **
Wings **
Women On The Verge Of A Nervous Breakdown **

AT THE NEW YORK MUSICAL FESTIVAL

Blood Ties ***
Fellowship * 1/2



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Antoine Dodson Arrested For Marijuana Possession

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Fingers and Toes ** 1/2
 Frog Kiss *** 1/2
 The Great Unknown ** 1/2
 Nighttime Traffic **
 Our Country *
 PopArt *
 Shine! The Horatio Alger Musical ** 1/2
 Show Choir **
 Tess: The New Musical **
 Trav'lin' ***
 Without You *** 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 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 tickets to the show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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