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Theater: Under The Radar Lights Up January; Cate Blanchett Lights Up Broadway

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THE FEVER ** out of ****

LULA DEL RAY ** out of ****

LA MÉLANCOLIE DES DRAGONS ** out of ****

TOP SECRET INTERNATIONAL (STATE 1) ** out of ****

THE PRESENT ** out of ****

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UNDER THE RADAR FESTIVAL AT THE PUBLIC

All four of these shows played during the Public's 2017 Under The Radar Festival. It's an annual tradition in January, now inspiring other similar curated festivals throughout the city around the same time. At every show, audiences poured in to witness inexpensively priced bold theater from around the world. You look at the list of shows and want to see everything and clearly many people agreed: I believe every performance I attended included stand-by audiences that filled every available seat.

The dream is to discover some new troupe you can follow for years with appreciation, knowing you saw them first. This year, all four productions I saw were flawed in one way or another. But each had admirable elements and showed a technical facility or generosity of spirit that led you to wish them well, even as you noted the work they had to do before turning these pieces into must-see theater. The through line, the problem each of

them had was quite simply story. They struggled with story, they ignored story or they confused information and a “different” experience with substitute enough for story. Story doesn’t mean a Dickensian plot filled to bursting wit dramatic twists. But even the most experimental theater needs something for an audience member to hang their hat on, a spine or sense of progression that lets them know they are moving towards something, even if it’s an effable moment of grace or beauty or resignation.

600 Highwaymen directly challenged the idea of story. Their piece *The Fever* was an experience, an exercise in experimentation (and some hardcore audience participation) and ritual. The audience was seated in a large room, with a single rectangle of seats creating a space in the middle where action would take place. Mostly it involved the cast members stepping forward (and revealing themselves, since they were among us and unidentified at first). They would intone some action or call for someone to join them. First they singled out people, gently asking them to stand on their right or move to the center and stretch out their hands and so on. Later they simply called for a person or people to do certain things and waited patiently (sometimes fruitlessly) for people to volunteer. Come with an open mind and you might have a perfectly pleasant if mild night out.

Several problems crop up. First, they begin the show by hinting at characters and a situation. An audience member is posed and then we are told this is so-and-so having a party. Other audience members are guests bringing beer and plates and such. Someone else arrives late and we’re told everyone applauded when they walked in. Then the hostess steps outside and sees neighbors. This is very sketchily done, just the barest hint of details. Then it’s dropped completely. It is replaced by the sort of exercises in trust that take place at confidence building workshops for corporate retreats. “Catch me when I fall?” asks a performer before collapsing into someone’s arms. This is done over and over until it too becomes a sort of amusing ritual. Yet this too is dropped for a vague, banal series of memory triggers, often trying to evoke specific childhood memories but so weirdly specific and yet vague it failed to work. By the end, one of the “characters” (i.e. barely realized hint of a person) is brought up again, as if we’ve been thinking about them rather than having forgot about the show’s opening entirely. As the final nail in the coffin, they then have a text read out that banally tells us what we just did and hopes for import: I was falling and you caught me; I was sad and you comforted me and the like.

Unfortunately, the cast chose to deliver most of their instructions/dialogue in a flat, affectless, style. Only one of their troupe brought a sense of play and personality to his comments. The rest seemed to try and stay out of the way of any fun. It was telling towards the end that a moment where the show clearly hoped an audience member would perform an action unbidden went ignored until finally a cast member stood up to fill the gap. Ritual can be powerful theater and there’s no need for “story.” But this was a scattershot, unsatisfying first draft, not a fully formed effort.

In contrast, Manual Cinema’s *Lula del Ray* had all sorts of story, at least on the surface. This troupe combined old school projectors of the sort used in schools back in the day along with slides, shadow puppetry, live actors, live music and taped audio to bring to life an animated film in front of our eyes. It’s like being in the audience at an old radio show where half the fun is seeing how they do it. *Lula del Ray* had a useful tension: you were always torn between simply absorbing the story (which was projected onto a large screen) and

watching how the actors below and around that screen were creating the effects.

Essentially a silent movie (there was almost no dialogue, just snatches of song), it told the story of a girl and her mom living out in the desert. The girl has a passion for astronomy, useful since her mom has a job listening in on headphones to the information coming from huge satellite dishes, an early sort of pioneering work in the space race. But the mother is too busy to pay attention to her daughter and the girl sets aside this passion for a new infatuation: rock and roll, specifically an act that seems akin to the Everly Brothers. The girl runs away to the big city for a concert, has adventures and then returns home again.

This sounds like a lot but in fact it's very hard to sustain a 75 minute silent movie with no dialogue. Long stretches in the desert actually contain very little we don't grasp in seconds. In all, they probably have about 20 minutes of (confused) story stretched out to evening length. Worse, the show bungles the storyline completely in the final third. Among five very savvy theater goers, we were all perplexed by a backstage event and scenes that were inexplicably missing. A flashback within a flashback (perhaps) combined with a banal framing structure didn't help things. With such a simple story, the first reaction should not be audience members wondering if they missed something.

One doesn't want to spoil the story by getting specific. And happily, watching the cast go through its paces was pleasure enough. They might want to consider an evening of two or three pieces or do a lot more work before stretching out a conceit for a full evening. Frankly the imagery they create would be engaging enough to show in cinemas as a short even without the fun of seeing them create it. This is too confused a tale to condense here but their work could actually be enjoyed as a final product. That's a credit to their ingenuity and talent, which is on display. But they really need to work on their story structure and realize that if a story can be told more succinctly, it should be.

I don't think story was remotely on the mind of French artist Philippe Quesne, who conceived, created the sets and directed *La Mélancolie des Dragons*. Presented by and at The Kitchen as part of the Public's UTR festival, Quesne created a genial, smile inducing atmosphere and positively nothing else. Nor did he want to. Fair enough.

The stage is a wintry scene, with a small Volkswagen car perhaps stuck in a clearing surrounded by trees, a large trailer hitched to it. Three or four dudes — apparently metal-heads, based on their long unruly hair — are in the car listening to AC/DC and the like, skipping from song to song. An elderly woman pops out of the trees, stares in at them, circles the trailer and then says hello. They tumble out of the car, say hello as if they know her and a few details emerge. They are stuck but they're not a band on tour — they are a troupe with a traveling Amusement Park, best dubbed the Melancholy Park.

Varied elements of the park are mentioned as even more metal heads come out of the trailer. With each new "attraction," they describe it, ask the woman if she'd like to see it and then show it to her. This becomes a running joke — "We could show it to you, if you like." "Oh yes, yes!" she says. And then they show it. It's all so diffident and shy and disarming one thinks of the mood created by Finnish film director Aki Kaurismäki.

The attractions grow in complexity, sort of, though only inflatable vinyl shapes that grow quite large amount to anything more than whimsical conceits (like a library of seven or ten books or a bubble machine or a water attraction that amounts to the world's tiniest fountain. True, watching them inflate a 12 foot long (or larger) vinyl oblong shape with a fan and then inflate and deflate it and inflate it again and again has a certain elemental appeal. (Indeed their park is built around the elements.) But mood is literally all one gets here. All the guys are essentially sweet-natured and low key, from the elderly dude who looks like Iggy Pop to the young member I dubbed the Librarian who probably gets all the groupies on tour. They are impossible to distinguish except by appearance and you quickly realize absolutely nothing will "happen." Sure, the finale with multiple large vinyl shapes blown up into a rubber forest of sorts has a certain majesty as the lights dim. But atmosphere when so many elements of an actual story are introduced creates its own, unsatisfying tension. It's simply too much (eight characters; each one blurring into the next) and not enough.

Finally, I attended Rimini Protokoll of Germany's *Top Secret International (State 1)*. Under The Radar truly is an international affair and might just as easily be dubbed the International Under The Radar festival. Their experience (it too has no story as such) takes place at the Brooklyn Museum. You put on headphones and are directed around to various rooms in the museum and the topic at hand is espionage and secrecy and what you are willing or not willing to do in various ethical dilemmas. (Peek at a mate's laptop when you see a message with an intriguing subject head? Torture someone when there's a bomb going off in one minute and 50 people might die?)

It's an essay and an experience, jumping back and forth from interviews playing in your head with various

people who have worked in the intelligence community to musings about privacy to Simon Says like directions that made me feel they'd been collaborating with 600 Highwaymen. Don't expect a Janet Cardiff-like audio experience. The piece feels rather disorganized, with interviews playing in your head while you're remembering where to walk to next, interrupted by brief cursory dealings with the art around you and so on. None of it coheres into anything more than a vaguely intelligent rambling discussion of high tech surveillance ("Privacy is a myth!") to the work of our governments and the tension between protection of secrets and the public's right to know plus philosophical musings, ethical conundrums and the odd dash of Egyptian art. Yes, it's a confusing mess, though not a boring one, since I've a natural interest in these issues and whenever the instructions flag or repeat themselves you can always have a good look at the pieces on display.

It's actually hard to judge the show because it was plagued with technical issues. On the one hand, that's part of the experience — a show that can't deliver on its premise is a problem right there. Their problems included the fact that the show is built around a GPS device using public wifi and of course museums have a LOT of people using public wifi. Surely they should have anticipated that or figured out what to do if and when the show had been staged elsewhere in the past? My audio got caught in a loop at several points, the GPS failed to register where I had moved correctly and since one has to move to certain rooms to register an answer to those morality questions, it meant the show decided I WOULD in fact sneak a peek into my partner's laptop when in fact I wanted to say I wouldn't. This happened several times, not to mention freezing up at the end and having a "climax" of sorts that was particularly underwhelming. If it was intended to emphasize our surveillance state, it failed miserably.

I wish I could have experienced the show without a hitch but I believe it wouldn't have appreciably improved. In fact, they pretend you are auditioning to be a spy (in our case, for the CIA) and unexpectedly the Brooklyn Museum was hosting a Latin ballroom dance competition so towards the end I was milling around as couples practiced dramatic moves near sculpture while a boisterous crowd cheered on competitors and it all felt very James Bond. If you're game, at the very least it's fun to see the Brooklyn Museum from a fresh, if nefarious perspective. I am perfectly happy to don headphones and dive into murky international conspiracies and questions of individual rights versus the need for security. But here the story was the experience and the experience of jumbling all these ideas while guiding the audience through various steps of the museum was not a satisfying one as play or intellectual exercise. If they could have accomplished both, I would have been delighted but at the very least I would have settled for one or the other.

THE PRESENT ** out of ****

ETHEL BARRYMORE THEATRE

Expectation is a funny thing and critics are as susceptible to it as anyone. Never doubt that any critic in the world would love to be surprised and discover a show they thought or heard or assumed might not set the world on fire is in fact pretty good or good or great or brilliant! No one wants to have a bad time at the theater. They have the pleasure of seeing a show before reviews are out (or just after, and easily avoiding them) but nonetheless word does spread and the sense of a show permeates the air. Cate Blanchett has mounted

numerous works in Australia and brought them to the US, productions of vivid imagination and intelligence, aided in no small part by her serious theatrical chops. So on paper, any stage appearance by Blanchett in a play from the canon is cause for happy anticipation.

But this specific piece is a new adaptation by Andrew Upton of Chekhov's first, very rough play *Platonov* and the word of mouth from those who'd seen it was not enthusiastic, to say the least. I feared a replay of the fall's apparently woebegone presentation of *The Cherry Orchard*. God knows, even the greatest play by Chekhov is devilishly difficult to bring to life. Time and time again, I've seen brilliant actors flounder and the evening crawl by at a painfully slow pace, be it *Orchard* or *Uncle Vanya* or another undisputed classic.

But here's a welcome respite. This early (early) work of Chekhov is given a cheeky translation by Upton, tossing in a specific modern setting and a lot of verve. Chekhov hadn't quite found his way yet but the comedy that is always present in his work is here more broad and silly, more like farce. The cast — led by Blanchett in fine form — keys into Upton's tone and jazzes it up. They speak over one another and bounce about with high spirits. The story — involving lovers (in spirit) who can never truly satisfy each other and so settle for disrupting the lives of everyone around them. Oh and money. Money is always a concern in Chekhov (and in life).

Director John Crowley keeps things moving apace. It must be said that the scenic design of Alice Babidge (who also did the costumes) looks modest in budget to a fault. And the relatively straightforward look of most of the play is disrupted by the Brechtian aura they choose for Act 3, with all sorts of smoke and a vaguely

unmoored landscape in which characters stumble around in the dark.

But Blanchett and Richard Roxburgh have chemistry to burn. You never doubt for a second their electric attraction or why everyone else would turn their lives topsy turvy after a glance from one of them. It amounts to very little when all is said and done and Act 3 truly does put a kibosh on the forward momentum. But I've seen far better Chekhov presented with deadly seriousness and the feeling that the night would never end. This is far inferior Chekhov presented with a sense of fun and when you expect so little, that's quite a relief. It may pale next to the experience you will get if you leave the theater and immediately listen to The Clash's brilliant classic album *London Calling* but at least they inspired you to put it on.

THEATER OF 2017

The Fever (The Public's UTR Festival) **

Lula del Ray (The Public's UTR Festival) **

La Mélancolie des Dragons (The Public's UTR Festival at the Kitchen) **

Top Secret International (State 1) (The Public's UTR Festival at Brooklyn Museum) **

The Present **

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Note: Michael Giltz is provided with free tickets to shows with the understanding that he will be writing a review. All productions are in New York City unless otherwise indicated.