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Michael Giltz

Freelance writer

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Theater: Under The Radar and Coil Warm Up January

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January has become an intriguing time for New York theatergoers. Two festivals mine intriguing work and rising artists from the US and around the world and bring them to NYC at bargain prices. [The Public Theater's Under The Radar](#) festival is turning the Gob Squad into a draw, thanks to this year's hit Super Night Shot and the return of their hit from last season, Kitchen. [PS 122's Coil](#) is creating good buzz for Argentinian director Mariano Pensotti and his show *The Past Is A Grotesque Animal* (a co-production of Coil

AND Under The Radar, while several shows have extended like Temporary Distortion's *Newyorkland*, a look at policemen on TV, film and in real life. Best of all are ticket prices, which make going to the theater a better bet than going to the movies or a baseball game. Here's the trailer for Under The Radar:

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Here's a rundown of the shows I've been able to catch.

SONTAG: REBORN * out of ****
THE PUBLIC/UNDER THE RADAR

I know very little about the writer Susan Sontag and yet want to learn more, so I was an ideal audience for this one-woman show about Sontag's coming of age and growth into a thinker. The look of the piece is the main attraction. Adapter and star Moe Angelos plays the young Sontag alongside a video projection of the older, more iconic Sontag (also played by Angelos), who smokes and offers gnomonic comments while observing the action. That image is seen on a scrim on stage left, with the live performance mostly taking place center stage behind a desk where Sontag is writing furiously in her diary. The text is taken from her journals and shows Sontag as a precocious teen commenting with a pretentious self-awareness about her life and desperate to break out and learn and experience. The problem is that Angelos has taken text from Sontag but she hasn't remotely shaped it into a dramatic story. Yes, we see Sontag's sexual awakening to women before getting married and having a child. Later she is awed in the presence of Thomas Mann (and palms a cigarette as a souvenir). But those are rare moments of interest in an otherwise dull recapitulation of events: Sontag read this book, read that author, liked this, didn't like that, finds many people a bore and so on. It doesn't help that Angelos is a limited actress, as her modest attempts to create other characters quickly prove. It's a labor of love, surely, with some technical flair (thanks to video designer Austin Switser, set designer Joshua Higgason, sound designer Dan Dobson and lighting designer Laura Mroczkowski). But ultimately it makes Sontag feel a little dull and that's surely the last thing one would say about her.

GOODBAR * 1/2 out of ****
THE PUBLIC/UNDER THE RADAR

This multi-media spin on the book and film *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* (the story of a woman discovering the sexual freedom of the singles bar but ultimately meeting her death at the hands of a random stranger) had a lot of potential. Goodbar was cutting edge for its day but soon hopelessly retrograde by purporting to show a liberated woman and then punishing her for it. What would a rock and roll extravaganza make of that? Hedwig and the Angry Inch is of course the touchstone here, but *Goodbar* is far, far away from that legendary show. It combines the efforts of rock band Bambi with the theatrical company Waterwell but here one and one do not make three or even two. The song cycle -- it's not really a musical -- is a mish-mash of ideas, including video, animated backdrops, straightforward rock songs, theatricalized moments and just about anything else you can imagine, none of it coherent or very interesting. Hanna Cheeks is our heroine, who apparently teaches deaf kids during the day and picks up guys in bars at night. None of these details cohere into a character; they're merely bits and drabs of information. The male counterpart is Kevin Townley. When the songs are in his range, his voice is effective, but too often here he is singing in character as someone else and the results are strained. He's also saddled with an 80s pop star haircut that makes him look silly and the two of them have absolutely no sexual chemistry on stage. There's not a single moment where one feels any dangerous pull between the two. They seem more like best friends having a goof. The costumes by Erik Bergrin seem especially half-baked but it's hard to do good work when a show is this confused and shapeless. Song titles are not provided but one or two numbers (like the samurai song) are memorable. Most are not. And too often there's a disconnect between the emotional scene and what's happening on stage. During a song where a guy our heroine picks up is singing about his most basic urges in a dominating, threatening manner, why is Cheek suddenly at the top of a ladder with a giant costume draped down to fill the stage and make her tower over the action? If anything, it should be the guy Frank who is towering over the stage at that moment. Numerous other examples abound but this feels like a not-ready-for-primetime work that feels out of place even in a festival about emerging talent.

MISSION DRIFT * 1/2 out of ****
CONNELLY THEATER/PS 122 COIL 2012

It's disheartening to hear this show has been in development on the road for several years. It feels like a very messy first draft that might possibly, maybe have a kernel of an idea after sifting through the many disparate, confusing elements. On a simple level...well, actually, there's nothing simple about this work which at least can boast of ambition and swinging for the fences. It begins with a myth about two gods, one Love (the artist) and the other the Wrestling (destruction) who compete with each other constantly. Then we jump to a cocktail waitress Joan (Amber Gray) in modern Las Vegas who is a third generation resident and loves the neon world even when she's laid off during the economic downturn. A glimpse of happiness comes into her life when she's romanced by a cowboy Chris (Ian Lassiter) who is heading out to Montana for good and wants her to come with him. Then we jump back in time to Dutch pioneers who head to America. Joris (Brian Hastert) and Catalina (Libby King, with a nice Angie Dickinson quality about her) turn out to be immortal or at least very long lived and go from settling on the east coast to moving further and further west until they help found Las Vegas hundreds of years later. It's all narrated by Miss Atomic (Heather Christian) and while the show isn't exactly confusing, it's certainly a great big mess with a smidgen of social commentary here and a dash of drama there interrupted by the occasional song and dance numbers. The central problem is that it doesn't feel as if The Team (the creative troupe) actually had a story to tell -- instead they had a lot of ideas and conceits and that rarely adds up to a

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story. The scenic design by Nick Vaughan is especially indifferent, never creating a sense of space on stage for Joan's home or the casinos or much of anything (and why are water bottles jumbled into groups on both sides of the stage?). The direction and movement for the dance pieces by Rachel Chavkin is little better. On a few songs, especially the quieter numbers, Christian has a lovely voice but by and large the lyrics are vague and the songs ineffective (plus she is forced to play an annoyingly brassy narrator). The other tech credits are little better. Despite all of this, it must be said that somehow the cast shows themselves to be talented actors merely trapped in a work burdened with unfocused ambition and far too many ideas. Each of them manage to salvage some moments of genuine emotion from Joan's celebration of Vegas in the neon graveyard to the first meeting of Yoris and Catalina to most every scene with Chris (though even Lassiter can't breathe life into a final summing-up speech when the audience wishes the show had ended 40 minutes earlier). Despite the mess that is Mission Drift, these are people with talent you want to see again in something much better.

THE TABLE ** 1/2 out of ****

LA MAMA/THE PUBLIC/UNDER THE RADAR

I'm crazy about puppetry which is maybe why I didn't react as strongly to this pleasant diversion while the audience applauded wildly. Blind Summit Theatre is a four person team including Mark Down, Nick Barnes, Sean Garratt and Sarah Calver. They've created a piece around an amusing little puppet who stands on a plain white table and proudly tells the audience they're going to see the entire life of Moses performed -- in real time -- right here on this table. He spends a little time explaining puppetry, extolling the virtues of the table, measuring it out in steps (from one corner to the opposite diagonal it is one, two, three big steps...and a little bit). The puppet is vivid and engaging, the work of the puppeteers delightful and just when you start to get a little restless, a woman comes in and sits at the table and starts to read to throw a spanner into the works. The puppet tries to reason with her and before you know it the entire table is upended and the work comes to a halt thanks to this rather meta-interruption. Though the entire show is about 60 minutes, this main story feels a tad drawn out, with no real development. The same is true in a different way for the encore piece. This involves a suitcase filled with pieces of paper that have drawings and text on them. The four cast members pull out the pages dramatically one by one and tell the story of people in a car who have a bird poop on the window, causing them to careen out of control and run over an old woman. This somehow leads into an elaborate spy story of some sort. It's all cleverly done with neat twists in text and visuals, including end credits and a comment on the piece of music that underscores the entire tale. Clearly Blind Summit have inventive minds and skills as performers. But their weakness is in story and character. The first piece has no story, nothing pulling you through the ramblings of the puppet (however amusing). The second piece has too much story and left the people I spoke with confused as to exactly what was going on. Everyone enjoyed how these pieces were performed. But to develop a genuine work of theater, they need to work much harder on story and structure and create a piece with emotion and heart that's worthy of their considerable talents. I for one will be glad to see them the next time they're in town and hopefully watch them grow as artists.

SUPER NIGHT SHOT ** 1/2 out of ****

THE PUBLIC/UNDER THE RADAR

This may have been the most anticipated show of Under The Radar for me because I've heard about Gob Squad for a while and their hit from last year -- *Kitchen* -- is returning to the Public for a three week stand starting January 19. Here's the trailer for that show:



thatkevinsmith
My daughter was born out of wedlock. In Senate candidate Tom Smith's mind, this is somehow akin (or Akin) to rape...
<http://t.co/yIWstbn>
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antderosa
Paul Ryan: Rape is a method of conception <http://t.co/KMgF2jWC>
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Super Night Shot turns out to be a sweet-natured goof, an improvisational piece that is filmed right before the audience watches it. Four members of the team head out into the night with video cameras. One is determined to be a super hero and right wrongs. Another must find someone willing to kiss our super hero at the finale. A third is devoted to publicity, trying to let people know who the super hero is and what he's going to do. And the fourth looks for a fitting space for the final climactic kiss to take place at. That's it, really. As with most improv, they are given some structure to hang their hats on -- several music cues are introduced at various points (such as the music from Bonnie Tyler's "Holding Out For A Hero" from *Foolhouse*) and at certain pre-arranged times all four of them spin in a circle slowly with the camera around them. This grounds the 60 minute film and gives them and the audience a breather. The rest of the time, it depends on their ability to draw strangers on the street into conversation and make it amusing. The tone is sweet, with New York, like most cities, proving quite amenable to kooks and odd ventures. The casting is key so on one night you might see them stumble across some really winning personalities and on others it might be a bit of a haul. Most nights are surely a mixed bag, like the one I saw. The person dragooned into kissing the super hero was sweet enough but not terribly interesting. Her being game was her main appeal. However, the super hero got very lucky in talking with the barber Big Mike right before the end. Big Mike is a classic New York character, no-nonsense and friendly. Is the super hero wasting his time? Is he a loser? No, said Big Mike. You can't be a loser when "you're doing your thing." The audience applauded. At the end they come on stage and take a bow along with the civilian and it's quite sweet. Still, it's a rather thin conceit to hang even an hour on and there are quite a few lulls. It doesn't help that on the night viewed the woman scouting for locations spoke to virtually no one and other than a few random comments disappeared from view. She and the publicity guy contributed very little to the night with the heavy lifting being done by the two other figures. It was enough to make *Super Night Shot* a pleasant experience but not a truly distinctive one.

THE 2011/2012 SEASON

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

The Agony And The Ecstasy Of Steve Jobs ** 1/2

All-American **

All's Well That Ends Well/Shakespeare in the Park **

The Atmosphere Of Memory 1/2 *

Bonnie & Clyde feature profile of Jeremy Jordan

Broadway By The Year: 1997 ** 1/2

The Cherry Orchard with Dianne Wiest **

Chinglish * 1/2

Close Up Space *

Crane Story **

Cymbeline at Barrow Street Theatre ***

An Evening With Patti Lupone and Mandy Patinkin ***

Follies *** 1/2

Fragments ***

Godspell ** 1/2

Goodbar * 1/2

Hair ***

Hand To God ***

Hero: The Musical * 1/2

Hugh Jackman: Back On Broadway ***

Irving Berlin's White Christmas ***

King Lear at Public with Sam Waterston **

Krapp's Last Tape with John Hurt ***

Lake Water **

Love's Labor's Lost at the PublicLab ** 1/2

Lysistrata Jones *

Man And Boy * 1/2

The Man Who Came To Dinner **

Maple And Vine **

Master Class w Tyne Daly ** 1/2

Measure For Measure/Shakespeare in the Park ***

Milk Like Sugar ***

Mission Drift * 1/2

Misterman ** 1/2

The Mountaintop ** 1/2

Newsies **

Pigpen's The Nightmare Story *** 1/2

Once *** 1/2

Olive and The Bitter Herbs ** 1/2

On A Clear Day You Can See Forever * 1/2

One Arm ***

Other Desert Cities on Broadway ** 1/2
Private Lives **
Queen Of The Mist ** 1/2
Radio City Christmas Spectacular ** 1/2
Relatively Speaking * 1/2
The Select (The Sun Also Rises) ** 1/2
Seminar **
Septimus & Clarissa *** 1/2
Shlemiel The First ** 1/2
Silence! The Musical * 1/2
69 Degrees South * 1/2
Sons Of The Prophet *** 1/2
Sontag: Reborn *
Spiderman: Turn Off The Dark * 1/2
Standing On Ceremony: The Gay Marriage Plays **
Stick Fly **
The Submission **
Super Night Shot ** 1/2
Sweet and Sad **
The Table ** 1/2
Titus Andronicus at Public with Jay O. Sanders * 1/2
Unnatural Acts ***
Venus In Fur ***
We Live Here **
Wild Animals You Should Know ** 1/2
Zarkana **

NEW YORK MUSICAL THEATRE FESTIVAL 2011

Blanche: The Bittersweet Life Of A Wild Prairie Dame *** 1/2
Central Avenue Breakdown ** 1/2
Crazy, Just Like Me ***
Cyclops: A Rock Opera *
Ennio: The Living Paper Cartoon ** 1/2
F---ing Hipsters **
Ghostlight **
Gotta Getta Girl ** 1/2 for staged reading
Greenwood *
Jack Perry Is Alive (And Dating) * 1/2
Kiki Baby ** 1/2
Kissless * 1/2
Madame X **
The Pigeon Boys ***
Time Between Us * 1/2
Tut **

FRINGEFEST NYC 2011

Araby *
The Bardy Bunch **
Books On Tape ** 1/2
Civilian **
Hard Travelin' With Woody ***
Leonard Cohen Koans *** 1/2
The More Loving One **
The Mountain Song *** 1/2
Paper Cuts ***
Parker & Dizzy's Fabulous Journey To The End Of The Rainbow ** 1/2
Pearl's Gone Blue ***
Rachel Calof ** 1/2
Romeo & Juliet: Choose Your Own Ending **
2 Burn * 1/2
Walls and Bridges **
What The Sparrow Said ** 1/2
Yeast Nation ***

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 was provided with free tickets to the shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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