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## Michael Giltz

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# Theater: "Wonderlands" With A Thud; "Pinter" With A Purpose And Then You Die

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**WONDERLAND** \* out of \*\*\*\*  
**BEING HAROLD PINTER** \*\* 1/2  
**WE'RE GONNA DIE** \*\*\*

**WONDERLAND** \* out of \*\*\*\*  
**MARQUIS THEATRE**

The career of composer Frank Wildhorn gets curiozier and curiozier. This is the first time I've seen one of his shows in person, rather than just listening to the music or seeing it performed on the Tonys or a talk show. Wildhorn typically tackles a well-known property and this is no exception: it's a modern, multi-culti spin on *Alice In Wonderland*. Alice is a school teacher in a

strained marriage living in Queens. (Her husband feels emasculated because she's the main breadwinner.) Before you can say White Rabbit, she's tumbling down the elevator to Wonderland, crossing swords with the new Mad Hatter and dealing with everything from a Cheshire Cat called El Gato who rolls with a posse to a White Knight (Darren Ritchie) who longs to save the day. Worst of all, Alice must contend with tepid pop psychology (she's in Wonderland to rediscover her inner child) and a clutch of anonymous songs.

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It's a dingy, cheap-looking affair with a mostly empty stage on which they trundle out various objects to dress each scene. Blurry digital projections on a giant screen in the back and around the frame of the stage add to the bus-and-truck feel. Costumes, sets and choreography are all thoroughly unattractive to a depressing degree. But when you're dealing with material where a joke about Disney owning the rights to the White Rabbit's catch phrase "I'm late! I'm late!" is a high point, I suppose it's hard to get inspired.

My guest felt Jose Llana had a little fun as El Gato and I took some modest amusement out of the White Knight's big number "One Night." It's essentially one joke -- a play on Knight and Night -- but using a Boyz II Men-style melody and choreography for the tune hints at the show that might have been. They were hoping for a new spin on *Alice* the way *The Wiz* re-imagined *The Wizard of Oz*. It didn't happen. For most of the cast, almost all of whom have been better in other shows, one simply feels bad, though young Carly Rose Sonenclar has a notably mature voice for a young girl and maintains her dignity quite well. Maybe it's because she spends most of the show away from *Wonderland* and safely back in New York City.

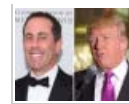
**BEING HAROLD PINTER** \*\* 1/2

**BEING HAROLD PINTER** \*\* 1/2

**LA MAMA**

The **Belarus Free Theatre** has brought three works to La MaMa in a co-production with The Public Theater, all charged with the political fire of people whose country suffers under the last dictatorship in Europe. I was only able to catch *Being Harold Pinter*, an intriguing collage by adapter/director Vladimir Scherban who combines scenes from Pinter plays with his Nobel acceptance speech and letters and testimony by Belarusians tortured and mistreated under the current regime.

The piece is solidly acted by the seven performers who find themselves now stranded and cut off from Belarus because they are speaking out. It's hard not to be moved by their talent and their plight. [You can read more about BFT here.](#) Here's a look at a 2009 performance in Sydney.



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Nonetheless, it must be said that the show is far more involving when Pinter's speech is used as a spine on which to hang scenes from his dramas. When the second half of the show segues into stories of repression in Belarus, it's not surprising that these accounts don't have the greatness found in some of Pinter's best work. Plus, dropping Pinter altogether from this section leaves us a little lost since there's no throughline to guide us into and beyond these painful testimonies. When we return to his words for the haunting finale -- which deftly uses a paper airplane as a heartbreaking image of defiance and hope -- it's with relief. Here's hoping **Belarus Free Theatre** can soon perform works that tackle the complexities and challenges of life in a country *after* a dictator has been overthrown.

**WE'RE GONNA DIE \*\*\*  
JOE'S PUB**

Young Jean Lee is one of the freshest, most interesting talents around. I wouldn't want to miss anything she does next and you shouldn't miss this offbeat treat. I became aware of Lee after this Guggenheim winner created *The Shipment*, a show that tackled race mostly from an African American perspective (though Lee is Korean by birth) and did it so smartly and wisely she attracted one of the best ensembles of that season.

Now she's on stage at Joe's Pub doing a roughly 55 minute show about painful, tragic moments in her life, delivered in casually heartbreaking monologues punctuated by catchy sing-along songs that remind us all that no one is special, we all suffer and then we die. Everybody sing! Actually, everybody *does* sing along by the end. The tunes are modest and Lee is a pretty good singer for a playwright.

But the entire evening is engaging and amusing and sad. Her openheartedness in singing these songs despite being no rocker feels soul-baring and naked in a positive, we've-all-felt-like-this-manner. Maybe every story is true, from the wrenching death of her dad to a friend's Worst Day Ever culminating in a torn cornea. Maybe they're shaped for dramatic purposes. Maybe they're all malarkey. Does it matter? It ends with Lee and her cute band doing a goofy little dance because why not? We're all gonna die. But not, if you're lucky, before discovering artists like **Young Jean Lee**.

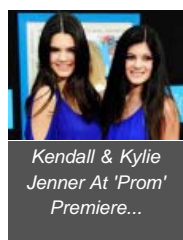
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*Thanks for reading. Michael Giltz is the cohost of **Showbiz Sandbox**, a weekly pop culture podcast that reveals the industry take on entertainment news of the day and features top journalists and opinion makers as guests. It's available free on 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 these shows with the understanding that he would be writing a review.*

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