

You Don't See That Every Day

Experimental cabaret craziness; the other kind of cabaret, at a Chinese restaurant; modern dance steps up; puppeteers go wild in Waterford; kid playwrights at Yale.

By Christopher Arnott

If you thought the last couple of Yale Summer Cabaret seasons, anchored by world-premiere modern dramas, were pushing the envelope, you ain't seen nothing yet. The 2005 edition, headed by Kristina Mendicino and Tea Alagic, has renovated the entire basement-level Cabaret space to resemble a mental ward, replete with scuffed tile floors, a rusty sink on the wall, and harsh neon lights. And it'll stay that way all summer. The season opener, *Woyzeck*, is punctuated with loud buzzing alarm sounds, the aural equivalent of a massive cattle prod. Using a new translation (by Mendicino) of the seldom-seen 21-scene "first draft" of Georg Buchner's fractious 1836 social drama, Alagic invokes images of Peter Weiss' *Marat/Sade*—though not that play's most famous production, by Peter Brook's Theater of Cruelty. Instead, Alagic imposes a harsh, rattling style in which an antic ensemble—all in garish whiteface with black highlights—bluntly blurt out the dialogue (and stage directions, and their character's names, and textual footnotes) while starkly depicting acts of sexual intercourse, murder and extreme social disorder. This provocative spectacle couldn't be shorter (barely an hour long), sharper (especially to your eardrums) or more to the point, which is that the world is mad. (*Woyzeck*, by the way, is simultaneously played by a man and a woman.) Four TV monitors augment the drama with silent images of a wind-up walking brain, fantasy cartoons, and cast members crawling on the grass.

Some will doubtless exclaim that the lunatics have taken over the asylum. I propose that these brave youth have created that other kind of asylum: a safe haven where they can build a small company, find a common language among themselves and with their audiences, and happily confound our collective views of what theater is and can become.

In a chat at Book Trader last week, Mendicino and Alagic told me that they hope to bring back "what cabaret's roots really were"—political theater and avant-garde exhibitions performed in European nightclubs in the first half of the 20th century. Those bleak and blistering war-torn entertainment connections will be driven home June 24 at a Summer Cabaret fund-raising gala, when *Woyzeck* will be preceded by the New York magician/performance artist the Amazing Russello, and food offerings will be German, Polish and French. The special event costs \$50 (\$40 for Cabaret subscribers), plus the price of a regular ticket. Mendicino will also explain the Summer Cab's aims for free when she lectures at 6:30 p.m. on June 23 at the New Haven Free Public Library.

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Another welcome theatrical surprise this summer, of an entirely different complexion, is the **Black Box Lounge Experience at Chow**. The brand new dim sum restaurant tucked behind Zinc (with its own entrance from Temple Plaza), installed a small, too-low stage and a grand piano to accommodate the series' first attraction, Anne Tofflemire. Accompanied by Ray Bailey

Quinnipiac Club every few months for the past year, tells me that last weekend's initial two offerings (Tofflemire on Friday, comedian Dave Mowers on Saturday) were a trial run to see if a weekly series was viable. Based on the packed houses for both Tofflemire's sets, Bisno should start getting busy booking more. Me, I'd settle for Anne Tofflemire every week.

In my 2004-5 season wrap-up a few weeks ago, I lamented the lack of modern dance shows in our area. Art-space, bless their adventurous artistic hearts, hosts **Adele Myers and Dancers** for an afternoon performance June 25, in

way for urban middle-schoolers to learn about theater: by collaborating with patient professionals and studying everything it takes to build a successful production. At Yale, the kids write original plays, which are then directed and acted by Yale School of Drama students, with the young writers observing and participating in every step of the process. This year's offerings are grouped under the collective title *Places Strange and Familiar*, and they'll be presented publicly over two evenings, June 24 and 25, at Yale's Off Broadway Theater. Titles range from *Spiritual Takeover*, *Confessions of a 13 Year Old Boy* and *Crush Feud* (all among Friday's five offerings) to *Puerto Rican Flava*, *The World's Peacemaker* and *The Killa* (to name a few on the Saturday schedule). I've attended many Dwight/Edgewood productions over the years and have often been startled by the personal, thought-provoking subject matter, the careful shaping of the pieces, and the sincere reactions of the audiences, who may attend expressly to cheer on their offspring but leave moved and impressed.

The comfortable lawns, stages and cool night air of the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center have groomed some great talents, from August Wilson to the *Avenue Q* team. Its National Playwrights Conference and its National Musical Theater Conference are renowned incubators for new work.

First, though, comes the annual **Puppetry Conference**, which culminates in public performances on June 24 and 25 at 7:30 p.m. for a bargain \$15. There's some recycling at work here: Marty Robinson, the arms behind Audrey II in both the original Off Broadway and Broadway productions of *Little Shop of Horrors*, is a longtime staple of the conference, and special guest artist Phillip Huber (of *Being John Malkovich* fame) was a special guest artist before, just five years ago. If the conference really wanted to be cutting edge, they might have invited some of the *Team America* marionettists. But even with these old hands pulling the strings, shocks and surprises are guaranteed. Puppetry today is a profound, progressive, post-modern and perverse art form. The conference at the O'Neill Center is always one of my favorite theater outings of the summer. ■

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PHOTO COURTESY OF YALE SUMMER CABARET

Woyzeck: Sound the alarm; theater can bite.

(who played with leisurely gusto, and folded origami birds when not required to plink), Tofflemire glided giddily and elegantly through her one-woman revue *In Search of Sondheim*. Her first-rate rendition of a quirky selection of Sondheim gems included two tunes from the underrated *Merrily We Roll Along*, the "little finger" bit from *Assassins*, "I Remember" from *Evening Primrose*, even the "Ipanema" parody "The Boy From..." from *The Mad Show*—and completely bypassed "Send in the Clowns." The songs, and their sentiments, were cleverly woven into a tale about Tofflemire's hilariously awkward real-life encounter with Sondheim at Carnegie Hall.

Producer Debbie Bisno, who's been bringing the hip New York storytelling collective *The Moth* to New Haven's

front of the gallery's current painting exhibition, *Zip*. Myers, a New Haven resident, and her five-person New York-based ensemble create dances (like "Umbrella Girl" and the silent "Slipline") with strong roles for modern women. The troupe's mission statement says it "combines robust athleticism with dramatic intent. The performers embody a raw quality that transforms the stage into a playground of intricate relationships." Put some "Slipline" in your *Zip*; we need dance downtown.

Yale's decade-old **Dwight/Edgewood Project** is based on New York's groundbreaking 52nd St. Project, which has lately inspired the Westport Country Playhouse to build a similar program. I can't imagine a better