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Fringe Finds

A real-life 15-year threesome; a psycho killer with a heart

BY DAVID KENNERLEY

The New York International Fringe Festival, now in its 12th year, is known for its giddy, goofy parodies, often set to music, and often relying on celebrity names to add luster. While many of these extravaganzas are cleverly amusing ("Love is Dead: A NecRomantic Musical Comedy"), others are patently atrocious ("China: The Whole Enchilada"), which was so racist I walked out at intermission).

The two strongest shows I've seen so far are thoughtful, quiet dramas whose power lies in understatement and subtlety, and humor is used sparingly to heighten emotion. Even at the frenetically fabulous Fringe, less is more.

The title of the FringeNYC play, "III" (Aug. 23 at 7 p.m. at the Cherry Lane Theatre, 38 Commerce St. at Bedford St.), refers to the

real-life, long-term three-way relationship among writer Glenway Wescott, MoMA curator and publisher Monroe Wheeler, and photographer George Platt Lynes.

Yet "III" can be easily applied to the show's creator, Joe Salvatore, who proves to be the most gifted triple-threat I've encountered at the Fringe this season. He wrote, directs, and stars in this magnificent production that feels like, with just a little re-jiggering, it belongs in a regular run in the Off-Broadway Cherry Lane Theater.

As you can imagine, a historical drama spanning from 1919 to 1943, laden with excerpts from actual letters, journal entries, and published poetry, and jumping from New York to Paris and various other locales, could be dreadfully mind-numbing. Far from it.

Salvatore has nimbly assembled all of these disparate elements and staged

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them simply and elegantly — all the while painting a fascinating portrait of gay life in the first half of the 20th century, and of the creative minds that burned bright back then.

The creator takes full advantage of the inherent imbalance of the 15-year ménage à trois, which the men consider "a family," to assure that tension will sustained.

There's no sex or nudity, but souls are laid bare, to startling effect.

A sequence where the two artists scope out potential male "thirds" while feigning to read books, using a secret whistle code, is utterly charming.

Another scene, where the



In a story about a long-running threesome, the passion between Daryl Embry as George Platt Lynes and John DeVecchio as Monroe Wheeler remains center stage.

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Bill Connington has adapted and performs a bone-chilling solo show, with "Zombie."

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three men, playing at cards, in slow motion, scheming against one another, echoes their real-life game and its mesmerizing. The house of cards that Wheeler builds is an obvious but apt metaphor — we wait, in dread, to see when that house comes tumbling down.

Occasionally, images of Lynes' sensuous photographs appear on a screen to enliven the action. Period-perfect sets were designed by Troy Hourie, and costumes by Traci DiGesù.

All three performances are superb, and I was baffled by the dearth of acting credits in the actors' bios.

Salvatore acts with his entire being, injecting his portrayal with jittery mannerisms that adeptly amplify Wescott's agitated state. The sight of the lovelorn author, trembling on the floor in a sitting fetal position, is heartbreakingly haunting.

As the luscious, young interloper, Daryl Embry conveys the debonair artist's easy charm and self-confidence without a hint of snootiness.

As the enterprising Wheeler, John Del Vecchio manages to stay lovable even while manipulating the sleeping arrangements in their new love nest

on East 89th Street, so he can share a bed with Lynes, leaving Westcott in another bedroom by himself.

When Lynes finally breaks it off, you can actually see the tears well up in Del Vecchio's puffy, bloodshot eyes. Dialogue at that moment is superfluous, and Salvatore recognizes that.

The end result? Vulnerable, appealing, amply fleshed out characters for whom we care deeply.

My only quibble, and it's a minor one, is that "III" focuses so heavily on the passion between Wheeler and Lynes, and on Wescott's jealousy, it nearly forgets that Lynes and Wescott, at least initially, formed a loving bond as well.

ZOMBIE

Does a heart beat deep within the stony shell of a serial psycho killer?

That's the central question that drives "Zombie" (Aug. 21 at 7:15 at Theatre Loft Space, 115 MacDougal Street at Minetta Lane, 3rd fl.), the bone-chilling solo show adapted and performed by Bill Connington, based on the Joyce Carol Oates novella of the same title.

The killer in question is Quentin P., a Jeffrey Dahmer-esque sociopath who drugs, rapes, tortures, and

murders adolescent boys in a twisted effort to create his very own zombie.

Why a zombie? Because this loner, who was so humiliated by muscle-bound athletes "laughing like apes" in 7th grade gym class that he was too scared to take a shower, now craves "someone to fulfill my every need." He has minimum requirements — victims must be a total stranger, good-looking, feisty, and well-hung.

We first encounter the 31-year old misfit holed up in the basement of a house he inherited from his Granny. Looking every bit the part, with receding hairline, nerdy glasses, and tidy, unfashionable attire — are those Hush Puppies he's wearing circa 1979? — he's playing a game of chess, recounting his gruesome exploits and his motivations behind them.

His opponent is a mannequin of a young man, sporting a Detroit Tigers baseball cap. We have a sinking feeling that Quentin will do more than just play chess with this lifeless zombie, and, soon enough, our fears are brutally realized.

Quentin's biggest problem isn't finding victims, it's keeping them alive. After all, cuddling a corpse is no fun.

Under the firm direction of Thomas Caruso, Connington

masterfully mines the rich source material, unflinching in the face of Oates' caustic language. Quentin casually speaks of worshipping "black cock, shy shrinking boy-penis like a baby rabbit, skinned" and "coming in my pants" as he drives an ice pick through a victim's eye during a botched frontal lobotomy operation.

"I could eat your heart and asshole and you'd never know it," he snarls, referring to his innocuous appearance.

When fantasizing of subduing and killing his father, who is getting wise to his crimes, Quentin muses, "In a struggle, we could be so close."

With his Michigan twang that adds to the creepiness, Connington crafts a deft account of a milquetoast gone very, very wrong. We are so immersed in this cruel, hour-long grotesquerie we barely notice that he trips over a few lines.

By plays end, we realize this serial killer is more than just a zombie himself, for we manage some glimpses of his heart, atrophied as it is. "Zombie" also challenges us, on a primal level, to confront the potential monsters that may lurk within ourselves, and the eternal quest to maintain emotional equilibrium.