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THEATER

## The Human Condition, Often in Need of Repair

By ANITA GATES

Here are some things I have learned about the 12th annual New York International Fringe Festival recently. You do not want to arrive late for a performance. (They won't let you in.) Six actors is considered a huge cast. The most popular (and possibly least expensive) set is a bed placed center stage. Suffolk Street is not within easy walking distance of Commerce Street.

The festival runs through Sunday with a wild mix of more than 200 comedies, dramas, musicals and one-person shows at 19 downtown locations. Here are a few of its offerings. (A complete schedule is at [fringenyc.org](http://fringenyc.org).)

### THE ALICE COMPLEX

Cherry Lane Theater

38 Commerce Street

West Village

Sally is the kind of woman who measures the distance between plates when she sets her table for a dinner party. When she gets rip-roaring drunk, she recites Emily Dickinson.

In Peter Barr Nickowitz's smart, incisive "Alice Complex," Sally (Lisa Banes), a famous feminist author turned professor, certainly deserves a stiff drink. A student, Rebecca (Xanthe Elbrick), drops by, desperate for help after being raped, she says. But when Sally's sympathetic response doesn't live up to Rebecca's youthful expectations, the younger woman attacks the older woman, ties her up and shifts into tirade mode. Sally, she says, has betrayed her own feminist ideals.

Ms. Banes and Ms. Elbrick, who give fierce opposing performances, play other women in their characters' pasts and futures, including Sally's strong Southern mother, a lesbian

bookstore owner and themselves as actresses. These vignettes range from enlightening to distracting, but the last is the most thought-provoking. It seems to ask, Do you know everything you should about your psychotherapist?

## MOURN THE LIVING HECTOR

CSV Cultural Center

107 Suffolk Street

Lower East Side

Mike (Jeff Clarke) looks like a typical young serviceman on leave, but this leave is going to be particularly eventful. For one thing, that guy in the corner with the bad cough is Polydamas (David Skeist), muttering about his enemies. "The Greeks are weakening," he says. "They're disorganized."

"This isn't one of those dangerous wars, is it?" Polydamas asks.

Performance Lab 115, a young theater company, juxtaposes the story of this American marine and that of Hector, the Trojan War hero and Polydamas' comrade in arms, to make devastating points in this beautifully acted, elegantly written drama.

This play's accomplishment is just how smoothly the two stories mesh, as one woman sells prosthetic limbs, another is beaten, the hero tries to wash blood out of white sheets and a murder is committed at a Laundromat. Perhaps the thing to keep in mind about Hector is that he dies.

## SEE HOW BEAUTIFUL I AM

The Return of Jackie Susann

SoHo Playhouse

15 Vandam Street

South Village

Jacqueline Susann was a strong personality, to say the least. As the author of the gleefully trashy 1960s novel "Valley of the Dolls," she seems to have willed herself into fame. And here she is again, 34 years after her death, complete with wig, false eyelashes and

self-aggrandizement, still working the room.

Debora Weston does a convincing, entertaining job as Susann in this one-woman show, written by Paul Minx. The play is chock-full of information about Susann's relatively short life, mostly about her affairs: She says her lovers included Eddie Cantor, Joe E. Lewis, "498 other Jewish comedians" and Coco Chanel. But some of the humor is lounge-act vulgar, and Ms. Weston comes off as an unpleasant aunt who thinks she's daring by using terms like "the horizontal mambo."

Well, maybe that's an accurate portrayal. As Susann, Ms. Weston isn't particularly likable. She describes her husband as a man no other woman would want, and is seriously hardhearted when she has her autistic son institutionalized. ("At least he didn't grow up normal and hate me.")

It would have been fascinating to dig a little deeper into the psyche of such a tough woman. Something intriguing is hinted at in Ms. Weston's line "Being thick-skinned isn't as easy as it looks."

## WALLS

The Studio @ Cherry Lane

38 Commerce Street (see above)

How does an average couple react when they wake up one morning to find that their house has been split neatly in two (right down the middle of their bed) by an impenetrable wall?

In Aron Ezra's "Walls," Naomi Pierce (Julie Jesneck) is most upset that her leather sofa and her doll collection have been sliced. Her husband, Dennis (Adam Richman), is practical: "I don't have time for this."

After considering explanations for the wall's appearance, they discover that honesty and revelations seem to make it crumble little by little, so they sit down on opposite sides of the obstruction and begin an orgy of confessions.

Mr. Richman's Dennis has one very satisfying rage speech, focusing on how hard he works so his wife can have material possessions, but otherwise the exchange of secrets plays out like a boring tennis match. The audience gets to watch a long volley, but every shot is the same. Even with something of a surprise ending, Mr. Ezra's terrific symbolic premise never takes flight.

## ZOMBIE

Players Loft

115 Macdougall Street

Greenwich Village

Quentin P. seems a familiar type at first. In his 30s, Quentin (Bill Connington) lives alone in the basement of what used to be his grandmother's house. His voice and demeanor are somewhat childlike, and he appears to be playing a pretend chess game with a life-size doll. When he announces, "I am an admitted sex offender," it is a shocking confession. But that is only the beginning of the story in "Zombie," a chilling one-man study of perversity adapted by Mr. Connington from a Joyce Carol Oates novella.

The banality of evil isn't a new subject in literature or drama, but fiction rarely reveals this much this clearly. Quentin gives his boy victims nicknames — like Bunny Gloves, Raisin Eyes and Squirrel — and insists he loves them. But his monstrousness quickly shows itself.

Mr. Connington commits totally to this haunting characterization and leaves us wondering exactly what kind of people are walking the streets alongside us.

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