

The Theater Season So Far . . .

From gory shoes to Wagner wrestling--a *Village Voice* critics roundtable

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Borne back ceaselessly into the novel: *Gatz*

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They're here indeed: *Rumble Ghost*

Despite a lack of fir-trimmed suits and a preference for taxis over sleighs, theater critics have much in common with Santa Claus. They dole out both sugarplums and lumps of coal. At particularly droll comedies, they might utter, "Ho, ho, ho." And as for knowing if you've been bad or good? Please! Like Old St. Nick, they're particularly busy this time of year, but three *Village Voice* critics—Eric Grode, Tom Sellar, and Alexis Soloski—took a breather from holiday obligations and sat down over a sack of gingerbread to discuss the season at its midpoint.

Soloski: Let's begin with who deserves the nicest presents underneath the tree. Any favorite shows?

Sellar: I really enjoyed two unusual musical reimaginings. One was Peaches doing *Peaches Christ Superstar*. I'm still not sure what I saw, but one woman performed all the songs and all the characters of *Jesus Christ Superstar*, accompanied by Chilly Gonzales, a rock pianist.

Soloski: Oh, I read about the penis cross!

Sellar: There was no cross in the performance I saw. I guess she decided to play it safe for the Society for Ethical Culture. But there was one really frightening part. I didn't realize she'd planted people in the audience to stand up during the Pontius Pilate scene and chant, "Crucify him!" I was thinking, wow, New York has gotten so angry.

Grode: And so in tune! And so rhythmically adroit!

Sellar: I also enjoyed *The Ring Cycle (Part 1 +2)* at the Bushwick Starr, which was a really clever re-creation of the opera.

Soloski: That was the mash-up of Wagner with 1980s professional wrestling?

Sellar: Well, it was more than that. They made it clear that the story of the *Ring* on one level is actually a primal family drama, which was really insightful. They were sort of making fun of domestic realism, but it worked very well.

Soloski: And Eric?

Grode: Well, at 59E59's First Irish Theatre Festival there was *Absolution* by Owen O'Neill, a one-man show about a vigilante who murders pedophile priests. It was graphic in a way I had expected and poetic in a way I hadn't, and meshed those two strains very well. And then there was *Rosmersholm* at the Pearl. I had never seen it before, and it was kind of fantastic. It's a really, thick, dense, kind of crazy play, and they gave it a really lucid production. It made me realize how little of Ibsen gets done in this city. We get *Hedda* every 18 months, but *Ghosts* and *Dollhouse* don't get done all that often, let alone *Peer Gynt* or *Little Eyolf*. Which is why I'm so excited for the upcoming *John Gabriel Borkman* at BAM in January.

Soloski: Did anyone else see *Buddy Cop 2*? That rates high on my list. It's a production by the Debate Society, a company I've found glib or arch, but this play went so much deeper. It was so detailed and finely observed in terms of character and dialogue, and it had the most remarkable set—half small-town police precinct and half racquetball court. Also, *Vision Disturbance*, a play about an optometrist written by Christina Masciotti and directed by Richard Maxwell, which was just lovely.

Sellar: The performance by Linda Mancini was quite wonderful.

Soloski: And I loved the coup de théâtre at the end—oh, wait, Eric hasn't seen it yet. Well, you can when it's revived at Under the Radar in January. It's quite a tender piece. In contrast, I thought *Play Dead* by Todd Robbins and Teller wonderfully scary. I was fully aware that no one was going to actually molest or murder me in the confines of the Players Theater, but I was petrified the whole time!

Grode: Every regional seems to do *Deathtrap* or *Sleuth* or *Wait Until Dark* every season. London's had *The Woman in Black* for so many years. And there are seven or eight booming haunted houses here, but why is it just a seasonal thing—why don't we do more spooky plays? They're really so much scarier than scary movies or scary books.

Sellar: Well, I recently saw *Rumble Ghost*, Jack Ferver's piece based on *Poltergeist* at P.S.122. It was also insightful the way that *Vision Disturbance* was, while riffing ironically on *Poltergeist* as a kind of totem of family dysfunction.

Soloski: Was it scary?

Sellar: No, it was hilarious. And moving. I have two other favorites. One was *The Coward* by Nick Jones at LCT3. It was such a perfectly structured comedy. You don't often see a younger playwright with such a command of structure. I thought it hilarious and sly and witty.

Soloski: I liked it, too, though at times I felt those structural niceties actually inhibited the comedy.

Sellar: And then, of course, *Gatz* by ERS at the Public. It was thoughtful and simple. Beautiful.

Grode: Yes, it was just exquisite, but by the end I was getting a little squirmy. People left during the intermission and I was incredibly indignant, but then there were about 45 minutes in the second act in which I thought that maybe they'd had the right idea. But the ending is gorgeous. Though right before, when Jim Fletcher, who plays Gatsby, lies down dead center, I

remember thinking: Six hours into a show, don't remind us that lying down is possible.

Soloski: And our holiday turkeys?

Grode: I didn't see much I found grim. I must have avoided it. I wanted to like *Bachelorette* by Leslye Headland at Second Stage Uptown more than I did, and the same thing with Craig Wright's *Mistakes Were Made* at Barrow Street.

Sellar: I was disappointed in Gregory Moss's backwoods romance *Orange, Hat & Grace*, I guess because Soho Rep has exciting programming, and I went expecting another fantastic new writer. But despite a very focused performance by Stephanie Roth Haberle, the script didn't have anything very fresh in it at all. And *That Hopey Changey Thing* by Richard Nelson at the Public was disappointing only because the title was so great. We were lured into the theater and forced to listen to a lecture about how deluded we were as Blue Staters.

Soloski: And that wasn't delightful?

Sellar: I saw it on election night, so I suppose it was better than sitting in front of the TV.

Soloski: I have a long list. I'm sorry—I feel so Grinchy this year: Kneehigh's *The Red Shoes* at St. Ann's Warehouse, which was very gory and very grim; the Roundabout's *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, in which even the one English woman in the cast seemed ill at ease and peculiarly accented; Beau Willimon's *Spirit Control* at MTC, which had a wonderful opening scene and plummeted from there. And more, I suppose.

Sellar: Have more gingerbread to help you get through it.

Soloski: What's on your wish list for seasons to come?

Grode: More new writing, certainly.

Sellar: There are a lot of really important international artists we ought to bring here, like the Swiss-German collective Rimini Protokoll—they brought once small piece to *Under the Radar*—but there are many other groups. I'm also surprised we don't have a vital political theater considering what's going on in the country.

Soloski: Though there have been many political plays this season: *In the Wake*, *The Human Scale*, *That Hopey Changey Thing*, *The Scottsboro Boys*, *The Great Game: Afghanistan*, *Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson* . . .

Sellar: But they deal with politics in such oblique ways. And I also feel the lack of a really vital classical theater. We are missing so many parts of the canon.

Grode: More *Rosmersholm*!

Soloski: More *Rosmersholm*, more terrifying plays, more racquetball.