

ThreeWeeks IN EDINBURGH

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Showstopper! The Improvised Musical

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CABARET

Cabaret Whore Encore!

Sarah Louise Young/ Laughing Horse Free Festival

The first thing I thought when leaving Sarah Louise Young's show was: this is too good to be free. She can sing, act and be funny all at the same time, proving herself a true performer and a force to be reckoned with. She greeted her audience as an old Broadway diva, ushering us to seats and cleverly building the excitement, before introducing us to a range of characters, each complete with accents, outrageous costumes and well rounded back stories that enhance their believability. However, all this pales in comparison to the genius of the songs, especially the lyrics: with witty choruses and satirical verses, there was a joke for every sense of humour. Go, sit back and smile.

Laughing Horse@The Three Sisters, 5 - 29 Aug (not 16,23), 6.15pm (7.15pm), free, fpp 209. [sj] tw rating 5/5

COMEDY

Chris McCausland - Emotional Retard

Bound & Gagged Comedy/ Beyond Compere

Ever wanted to take a saw to Johnny Depp's wheelie-bin? Well, Chris McCausland has. This blind comedian from Liverpool asked the audience to laugh out loud at his show - "I can't see smiles" - but no encouragement was needed: McCausland is the complete article. Tackling topics from complaint mail, to that last Kit-Kat in the fridge, McCausland's dry, self-deprecating humour kept the laughs coming. There were several video sections to his performance that are simply not necessary, since he is himself so compelling, and served only to slow down what was otherwise a pacy and dynamic performance. Watch out for Chris McCausland in the future - particularly if your name's Johnny Depp.

Pleasance Courtyard, 7-10, 12-17, 19-30 Aug, 5.15pm (6.15pm), £6.00, fpp 44 [amb] tw rating 4/5

Espionage a Trois

Ben Morgan/ Laughing Horse Free Festival

They say the first impression is the most important one, in which case I can safely say I made up my mind about this free stand-up show within about thirty seconds, as soon as host Ben Morgan made his first, lame opening gambits, which were about as entertaining as watching a small animal being asphyxiated. Fortunately, things improved slightly with the two acts that followed: the first gamely made his own Asperger's syndrome the subject of some amusing gags, while the second was a surreal character act that drew humour from its own intentional awkwardness. However, Morgan's final turn, a series of jokes centred entirely on misogyny, was neither clever nor funny and left this reviewer feeling irritated and bored.

Laughing Horse@Espionage, 5 - 29 Aug, 5.50pm (6.30pm), free, fpp 59. [ac] tw rating 2/5

Showstopper! The Improvised Musical

Showstopper Productions - Festival Highlights

I don't really like musicals. I've seen my fair share, but I've never been a massive fan. I'm telling you this because I want to be clear that when I tell you how good 'Showstopper!' is - and it is outstanding - knowing your Sondheims from your Sullivans is not a prerequisite; it will appeal as much to musical theatre buffs as it will to complete musical virgins. The ridiculously talented cast improvise a musical live, based on audience suggestions, and the outcome somehow manages both to be hilariously funny and technically magnificent. Every number was a barnstormer, greeted with thunderous, and well deserved, applause. Hilarious, beautifully sung and delivered in a tremendously professional manner; this really is something special.

Gilded Balloon Teviot, 6 - 29 Aug (not 18), times vary, £10.00 - £12.00, fpp 122. [al]

tw rating 5/5

Mary Barrel Is Really Good At Things

Carrie Barrett

From coercing her sound man into kissing her, to flirting (badly) with audience members, Mary Barrel tries hard to make you love her. But try as she might, it still doesn't take long for this dim-witted act to become annoying. As she paces back and forth, clapping herself and giggling maniacally, she tries to teach the audience some of the things she is good at - her greatest skill, apparently, being the high-five. The audience's contributions are the most amusing part, and reveal that performer Carrie Barrett is clearly a lot quicker than her alter-ego (which is not saying much). Mary Barrel might be really good at some things, but comedy certainly isn't one of them.

theSpace on the Mile@Jury's Inn, 6 - 28 Aug (not 8, 15, 22), times vary, £5.00 - £7.00, fpp 94. [lj]

tw rating 1/5

Kooky Babooshka - Free

Forget 'Mitchell and Webb'. Forget 'Little Britain'. Here comes 'Kooky Babooshka'! Brimming with talent, this female four piece showcase their hilarious sketch show for free! As good as, if not better than, an average episode of 'Not The Nine O'clock News', these girls combine the surreal and the farcical to great effect. Like most sketch shows it was hit-and-miss, but the good bits were absolutely spot-on: their inspired take on 'Poker Face' was a gem I won't forget for quite some time. Although at times slow, Kooky Babooshka did not outstay their welcome and if they don't get their own TV Slot within the next five years, it would be a sin.

Laughing Horse @ City Café, 5 - 14 Aug, 12.00pm, £0.00, fpp 86. [dc]

tw rating 3/5

Death By Gameshow

Freya & Josh

This show is as daft as it is deft, and your reaction to it will depend on how you like your comedy. If you enjoy things like 'Mighty Boosh', this bizarre yet original take on



SNAP OF THE DAY: It's the Fringe on a swing, Grid Iron bring 'Decky Does A Bronco' back to the festival. Photo: Kate Edwards

the game show is worth it, if you're after a sharp afternoon of pithy social commentary, don't get your wallet out. The darkly surreal act sometimes reaches a level that seems slightly contrived, provoking titters from an uncomfortable audience rather than guffaws of satisfaction, but occasionally the good overshadows the bad, as the writing displays moments of genuine smartness, and the show is saved by its pace. Freya & Josh have potential, but just need to tighten the strings and blow the cobwebs off the old toilet jokes.

C Soco, 7 - 30 Aug, 3.30pm (4.20pm), £6.50-£9.50, fpp 54. [mb]

tw rating 3/5

Jessica Ransom - Ransom's Million

Phil McIntyre Entertainments by Arrangement With Dawn Sedgewick Management

What would you do with a million pounds? Well, if you're Jessica Ransom, give it away. In the intimate confines of the Cellar at Pleasance, Ransom told the story of how her boss gave her the task of donating a

million pounds of money - searched for by the police, entirely co-incidentally - to one deserving person. Impersonating the self-nominated candidates she met along the way, Ransom has constructed a fine show around her extraordinary talent for impressions and by integrating pre-recorded sketches into the performance, Ransom has created an act as visually interesting as it is smart. A staple of BBC One's Armstrong and Miller, it surely won't be long before she has a television show of her own.

Pleasance Courtyard, 4 - 30 Aug, (not 16), 4.45pm (5.45pm), £7.00 - £10.50, fpp 77. [amb] tw rating 4/5

Jarlath Regan: Not So Common Sense

Mick Perrin For Just For Laughs Live

The charming subtlety of Jarlath Regan's Irish accent is the harbinger of some slightly lacklustre material. Discussing elements of everyday life which we take for granted, he spins them round and reinterprets them to

cont>>

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cont>> provide a heart-warming look at topics such as the recession and optimism. An incredibly likeable man, Regan is simply too nice as a comedian. Moments of his show were brilliant but these occasions were somewhat sparse and one was more inclined to smile in approval than to laugh out loud. An all round enjoyable show: recommended if you're looking for light-relief, and inoffensive enough to take your grandparents to, but certainly not side-splitting.

Gilded Balloon Teviot, 4 – 30 Aug, 6.45pm (7.45pm), £5.00 - £9.50, fpp75. [aq]

tw rating 3/5

Exceptionally Average – Free

Dave Baucutt/ Laughing Horse Free Festival

After several years of trying to make a breakthrough, Dave Baucutt is so almost there. Arriving late, his composure nearly slipped, but his lovable demeanour and smile relaxed the audience, showing that he’s an old hand. Although the jokes are extremely hit and miss, there are the grains of something special here: an erroneously murdered hamster, a Lion King-esque birth scenario, and a rap song drenched in pathos stand out as examples of definite comic talent and promise. The rest, however, lent itself to retelling about as much as a funeral elegy. This is a comic who desperately needs to cut some dead wood. Exceptionally Average? Perhaps for now. But keep your eye on this one – he’s got potential.

Laughing Horse @ The Counting House, 5 – 29 Aug (not 16, 21), 12.00pm (12.50pm), free, fpp 60. [ah]

tw rating 2/5

Conor O’Toole: Come Look at Me for an Hour

Conor O’Toole

It can’t be easy performing in front of only two people – both journalists – at a comedy gig, and for Conor O’Toole it clearly wasn’t. Maybe it was the lack of audience, maybe it was the lack of decent material (there are only so many jokes to be made about vegetarianism), or maybe it was simply his age (at 19, what kind of life experience can he have?), but it just didn’t click for him. There were some positive moments – the material on his Irish background and the Catholic Church carried far more resonance than anything else – and he has a memorable stage persona: he just needs to find some more suitable content to match it.

Sweet Grassmarket, 5-16, 18-30, 11:30am (12.30pm), £6.00, fpp 49. [amb]

tw rating 2/5

DANCE AND PHYSICAL THEATRE

Transformation Conscious Theatre

Few are brave enough to stand in front of a group of strangers and announce that they are damaged and flawed. Written, directed and performed by Gemsyii, 'Transformation' is a physical depiction of one woman's life using dance, body rhythms and song. It would be easy for Gemsyii to portray herself as a victim looking for sympathy, but instead she selflessly opens up her life to the audience so that we may apply her hard-learned lessons to our own lives. The nature of the show makes it difficult to call it enjoyable in the traditional sense: it's not easy to be entertained by someone else's suffering, and at times the dark content conjured an uncomfortable atmosphere.

Zoo Roxy, 6 – 30 Aug (not 18), 11.50am (12.40pm), £6.00 - £9.00, fpp 154. [sj]

tw rating 3/5

Call me! Swishtheatre

Short, sweet but lacking in substance, 'Call me!' explores the technological world that surrounds the youth of today. The energized cast bob, jump and side-step their way through a plethora of well-choreographed explorations of the intrusive nature of mobile phones, which are entertaining but a little vacuous. The show is further let down by the unnecessary and overly simple plot: girl-loses-phone, boy-finds-phone, boy-and-girl-fall-in-love. It is this irritatingly obvious story-line that holds back what otherwise could have been an innovative piece of physical theatre: props are cleverly used to direct the audience's focus at various moments, and the spacial awareness of these enthusiastic performances makes for a slick show. Sadly, its vapid plot leaves the audience unfulfilled. theSpaces@Surgeons Hall, 6-14 Aug, 9.20pm, £5.00, fpp144. [sh]

tw rating 3/5

EVENTS

Auld Reekie Tours Haunted Underground Experience

Down a dark, dark corridor there was a dark, dark street. Edinburgh's Auld Reekie tours take you into the hidden, haunted vaults beneath the city, where you'll find a torture museum, a working witchcraft temple and - allegedly - more than a few ghosts. Our guide was adept at spinning out the grisly stories of the vaults' history to create a genuinely creepy atmosphere that had me jumping at the slightest noise. Auld Reekie has become an Edinburgh institution, and whether or not you believe in the paranormal, this is a spooky and unsettling way to spend an hour. There's even a more extreme late night Terror Tour which is surely not for the faint hearted...

Auld Reekie Tours - Meeting Point, 6 - 28 Aug, times vary, £7.00 - £12.00, ffp 156. [crc]

tw rating 4/5

MUSIC

Festival Folk @ The Oak/The Wee Folk Club Various Artists And Traditional Musicians From Scotland And Beyond If there were a single motto to encompass the Fringe, it would be to expect the unexpected. Always. 'Festival Folk @ The Oak' brilliantly illustrates this rule. I had no expectations, but as the basement bar filled to the brim so did my anticipation. The evening's act was Kray Van Kirk, whose 12-string guitar and soaring vocals were spellbinding; the Alaskan singer-songwriter, in his Edinburgh debut, was not the reason I arrived early, but was certainly why I stayed late. The intimacy of the room and intensity of the music cannot be matched, and the only reason this show isn't 5/5, is because I don't want to judge the rest of the line-up. I want you to.

The Royal Oak, 2 Aug – 5 Sep, 8.30pm (11.00pm), £5.00, fpp 185. [ajb]

tw rating 4/5

MUSICALS AND OPERA

Spend, Spend, Spend

Why Not? Musical Theatre Company

Although this isn't the most memorable musical, the Why Not? Musical Theatre Company pack a surprising punch and exhibit professionalism beyond their years. Each performer oozes confidence and is clearly relishing the experience, making this an infectiously enjoyable performance to watch. The staging is perhaps a little uninspiring and some costumes are scruffy and ill-fitting, but the choreography is smooth and well thought-out and the vocals good, generally. Eleanor Gudgin does an admirable job of portraying the turbulent life and loves of the young Viv Nicholson, embodying a youthful flirtiness with the charming male ensemble, and emotional maturity and musicality in the closing scenes, as does Aileen Baxter as the older Viv. Overall, a promising display from a hard-working young group.

theSpaces @ Surgeons Hall, 6 – 14 Aug (not 08), 5.15pm (6.45pm), £7.00, fpp 218. [gjs]

tw rating 3/5

Barockestra: Rocking The Classics

Barockestra

Barockestra promised an extravaganza on their adverts and, boy, do they deliver! As soon as you hear their opening song, a pulsating cover of Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries', you know you're in for a night of electric entertainment. Comprised of a five-piece band who aim to provide inspired rock versions of popular classics (aided by two tremendous opera singers, cheeky ballet dancers and Microsoft PowerPoint), Barockestra truly know how to entertain. Although there were a couple of technical hitches, there was no faulting the amazing, foot-tapping music. Admittedly, it might not be to everybody's taste, but it is a magnificent way to end your evening. This musical extravaganza truly is a memorable feast for the senses.

New Town Theatre, 5 – 29 Aug (not 17), 10.10pm (11.20pm), £7.50 - £12.00, fpp 209. [dc]

tw rating 4/5

The Man And Men

North Of England Concert Theatre

It is a real shame that this avant-garde opera did not work. All the essential ingredients were there - stunning set, fantastic costumes

- but the show still fell flat. Although the five musicians on stage were talented, they seemed lost in the experimental music and clunky stage direction and the lead singer felt out of place in the whole setting; her costume jarred against the back drop and her vocals felt too traditional against the eclectic accompaniment. The story line was almost incomprehensible, preventing the subtleties of the characterisation from emerging successfully, and the music was unusual, but regularly slipped into being grating. The performance was weakened by combining too many styles and a less-is-more approach may have been more successful.

Hill Street Theatre, 5 – 30 Aug (not 10,17,23,24), 4.35pm (5.25pm), £7.00 - £9.00, fpp 214. [sj]

tw rating 2/5

THEATRE

Naked Splendour

Andy Jordan Productions

Phillip Herbert's one-man performance is, in the simplest terms, a life-drawing class with stories – it could easily be dressed up as 'performance art', but it's too honest and completely without pretence or ego. You sit, and he poses, and you draw, and he talks: it's wonderful! Herbert is a warm and funny character and cultivates a relaxed and intimate atmosphere as he relates absurd encounters and emotional moments. Donating your sketches at the end is far more rewarding than seeing stand-up and encourages genuine dialogue amongst the audience. 'Naked Splendour' is a piece that quietly celebrates creativity and individuality; it's simple, sweet and touching, and a full house will make it totally magical. Go on – materials are provided.

C central, 5 – 30 Aug, 3.10pm (4.05pm), £7.50 - £10.50, fpp 274. [tm]

tw rating 5/5

Ups & Downs

KDC Theatre

A veritable cocktail of characters is stirred up in heaven's waiting room in KDC'S devised comedy, with strong performances by Govind Hodgson and Neil Ballinger. As each enters the afterlife the details of their lives and manner of their deaths – from torture to roadkill to overdose – are elicited by flirty receptionist Ursula and John, a case worker with a dark history. A penultimate judgement is made by a snappily dressed and hung-over Holy Ghost that "can be a bit arsey sometimes". In this witty, if somewhat unsubtle, examination of what it takes to get into heaven, "murderers, heretics and showbiz columnists" are the straightforward cases, and junk email senders are encased in a frozen block of spam in hell's newly added circle 4.41.

Sweet Grassmarket, 5 – 15 Aug, 12.00pm (1.00pm), £7.00 - £8.00, fpp 301. [hm]

tw rating 3/5

Against The Odds

Jade Blue

This absorbing one-woman show is a tour-de-force of acting and narrative ideas. Revolving around Flora, a young mathematical genius trying to come to terms with the world she lives in, 'Against The Odds' is partly interactive: through a device where audience members select cards from a deck, spectators influence how the play unravels. But the show should be seen for the achievement of actress Jade Blue (also one of the co-writers), who inhabits six different roles in a bravura performance full of great individual characterisations and subtle nuances. Much of the effect was derived from the tenderness in her acting, making even the toughest of characters somehow sympathetic, and others were played with such fragility that was ultimately very moving.

Hill Street Theatre, 5 - 30 Aug (not 10, 17, 24), 4.30pm (5.30pm), £7.00 - £9.00, fpp 223. [ef]

tw rating 4/5

Caught On Tape

Putney Players

Would you share your deepest secrets or darkest lies with a complete stranger? What if you knew they would then be turned into a Fringe show? Luckily for this young cast, some people are willing to reveal all, and the confessions that the company has gathered through interviews and anonymous contributions form the basis of this exploration of secrets, lies and deception. Although the cast met for the first time just a few weeks ago, they have since managed

to research, devise and rehearse a thought-provoking and highly polished piece. The show is an interesting mix of different performance styles, and its success relies as much on the youthful energy of the cast as on the secrets of strangers.

The Zoo, 6 - 8 Aug, 11.15am (12.00pm), £4.00 - £7.00, fpp 238. [lj]

tw rating 3/5

Oh What A Lovely War On Terror

Angels and Virgins Theatre Company

Britain and America's actions in Iraq and Afghanistan provide ripe material for this astute piece of political comedy. Drawing on recent news and quoting inept politicians verbatim (well, you really couldn't make it up), the sketch show took a while to get into its stride, but quick-fire wit and a couple of surreal musical numbers soon had the audience laughing out loud. The cast were all very versatile, switching from roles as vapid political aides to apathetic soldiers in the blink of an eye. At times, however, the satire needed more bite: I was left feeling it had only scratched the surface of the lies and foul-ups of the War on Terror.

C central, 5 - 30 Aug (not 17), 4.55pm (5.55pm), £6.50 - £9.50, fpp 275. [crc]

tw rating 3/5

Love Bites

Ignis Fatuus Theatre

In the opening minutes of 'Love Bites,' when Claire meets Stephen, we see him for the unlovable pig that he is. She doesn't. It's not long before we hate both lead characters and hope against hope that Claire may eventually wake up. Her only ally is a television food chef who, in solidarity with Claire, violently hacks up a zucchini... in the end, some sort of cathartic sound emanates from our female protagonist. Hopefully she whacks off his penis, but only people in the front row know for sure because the sight lines for the rest of the audience are so horrible that we have no idea what just happened. Luckily, by that point, we don't care, despite earnest acting by all on stage.

theSpace on the Mile @ Jury's Inn, 06 - 28 Aug, 8.05pm (8.45pm), £5.00 - £7.50, fpp 268. [sl]

tw rating 2/5

Hamlet For Girls

Barefoot In The Grass

Like a Richard Curtis rom-com, this play contains a good mix of humour and emotional turmoil without being over the top in either direction, using everyday issues and relationship woes to form the basis of the plot, and sprinkling them with just enough originality to keep the piece fresh yet reassuringly familiar. The four actors work well together, maintaining an on-stage chemistry that makes the action more convincing; like the four elements, each character had an important role to play and as a team they perfectly complemented each other overall. Subtle scene changes and clean lighting helped to create a play that flowed with just the right amount of forward momentum, and benefited from the simplicity of its structure, its well rounded characters and its talented cast.

theSpaces on the Mile @ The Radisson, 6 – 28 Aug (not 15,22), 2.05pm (2.55pm), £5.50 - £7.50, fpp 257. [sj]

tw rating 4/5

The Diary of Anne Frank

Patch Of Blue Theatre in association with Hartshorn-Hook Productions

It's a story we all know, played out with more enthusiasm than polish by this new Scottish company. The cramped staging effectively evokes the claustrophobia of the Franks' hiding place and there are some good moments of tension as the anxiety mounts and the trapped families begin to annoy each other. However, other potentially strong moments are lost due to a lack vocal projection or being taken too fast: the climactic entrance of the soldiers, for example, was handled cleverly, but overall, too swiftly. Hopefully this will improve as the run continues and the show settles in, as some of the performances show potential, and there are nice dynamics between some of the characters, particularly Anne and her father.

C too, 5 – 30 Aug, 5.00pm (6.00pm), £5.50 - £9.50, fpp 244. [jm]

tw rating 3/5

The Day The Sky Turned Black

Ali Kennedy-Scott

Hundreds of people lost their lives and thousands more lost homes, possessions and

loved ones in Black Saturday's devastating bush fires, Australia's greatest unnatural disaster. This moving, poignant play tells the story of four survivors and one journalist who witnessed the aftermath. Ali Kennedy-Scott, who wrote the piece, plays all five parts, skilfully managing to evoke five different characters without exaggerating their differences. She moves fluidly from one to the next, slowly unfolding the tragedy of that day's events and the bitter aftermath, and walks a fine line with confidence: praising the bravery and generosity of those involved in the relief effort, honouring those who lost their lives, and drawing attention to the negligence that allowed the tragedy to occur.

C soco, 4 – 30 Aug (not 16), 5.30pm (6.25pm), £7.50 - £10.50, fpp 241. [al]

tw rating 4/5

Aleister Crowley: A Passion for Evil

Purple Media

Aleister Crowley was an influential occult leader who once spent his remaining money on red paint so that he could scrawl the giant words 'do what thou wilt' on a cliff face. In this solo play, John Burns embodies Crowley as he vindicates his immoral and contradictory philosophy and candidly recounts formative life events. The scope is impressive - Burns takes the audience to a debauched Victorian party, halfway up a mountainside and even inside a coffin with Houdini (all with minimal set), and the act is eerie, thought-provoking, and enthralling. However, unless you have a specific interest in the topic or are particularly keen on small-scale, edgy one-man dramas, this might be a bit far out for you.

C central, 6 – 28 Aug (not 22, 23), 4.15pm (5.10pm), £7.50 - £10.50, fpp 223. [mg]

tw rating 3/5

The Student

No B.S. Productions

"I'm the manifestation of your rage" – "No you're not!" – "Yes I am": an unequivocally concise summary of this schizophrenic merger between 'Fight Club' and 'Drop Dead Fred'. This well wrought concept of an individual (the student) hallucinating a ruthless embodiment of his emotional repression (romantic rejection), is done with minimal flair, and even less originality. Performances range from mechanical to melodramatic largely propelled by the lack of freshness in the concept and a repetitive script acted with ceaselessly overblown reactions. There are some positives; the enthusiasm in the actors is evident. Yet it is undeniably mediocre and could have been explored with far more panache. Sadly many have done it, and the vast majority have done it better.

theSpaces on the Mile @ The Radisson, 6 – 28 Aug (not 08, 15, 22), times vary, £4.00 - £7.00, fpp 292. [np]

tw rating 2/5

The Track of the Cat

bearplate in association with C theatre

An eerie stillness consumes the dimly lit space from start to finish in this spookily compelling adaptation of Walter van Tilburg Clark's novel, set in Sierra Nevada in 1900. The employment of an all female cast (aside from haunting music performed sensitively by Benni Hemm Hemm) is intriguing and, on paper, probably shouldn't work – but somehow it does. Each actress contributes a commanding presence as the group portrays the superstitions, uncontrollable fears and stifling tensions within the Bridges household. The simple uniform of black dresses and constant onstage group formation is reminiscent of a Greek chorus, whilst the play's style is wonderfully evocative of Arthur Miller's masterpieces. Understated yet powerful direction and writing result in a chilling and Crucible-esque piece. Worth seeing.

C, 4 – 30 Aug, 8.10pm (9.30pm), £8.50 - £11.50, fpp 298. [gjs]

tw rating 4/5

THREEWEEKS IN EDINBURGH

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TW RATINGS EXPLAINED: 1/5 BAD | 2/5 MEDIOCRE | 3/5 GOOD | 4/5 VERY GOOD | 5/5 BRILLIANT