

# The Sun

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## Fringe Free-for-All Cleans Up Its Act

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**WHEN BROADWAY MOUNTS A JUKEBOX MUSICAL, IT RAIDS THE CATALOGS OF ABBA OR THE BEACH Boys. When the New York International Fringe Festival attempts the same, it turns to Oingo Boingo.**

Because "Only a Lad" knit the song list on that jangly New Wave band, it is one of the lucky among the 200-plus Fringe titles to have garnered a modicum of pre-opening buzz. Vocalist-composer Danny Elfman leads the band and the talk surrounding the show centered on the fact that Mr. Elfman, now a well-established film composer, had lent his oeuvre to the Fringe project, thus giving it a patina of legitimacy. What ought to have provoked more comment, however, was that the Fringe, in its 10th year, now has its own example of that cynical genre of the Great White Way, the jukebox musical. This fact expressed as succinctly as possible just how far — for better or worse—the artistic free-for-all has come from its scrappy origins in one brief decade.

More dispiriting than the very presence of "Only a Lad" at the fest was how similar in spirit it is to such Broadway projects like "Good Vibrations" and "Mamma Mia!," which randomly hung dozens of hit songs on a clothesline of a plot, call it a show, and then check the till. Oingo Boingo's collection of witty, danceable songs about youthful disaffection has the advantage of being new material to many audience members (at least those who didn't roll up the sleeves of their shiny sports jackets in the early '80s). But librettist Andrew Loschert has created a plot as familiar and formulaic as a John Hughes film, in which the soulful outcasts at an L.A. high school square off against the stuck-up, popular, rich kids. Molly Ringwald, James Spader, and Anthony Michael Hall could point to the roles meant for them while blindfolded.

To Mr. Loschert's credit, his work here is no less slipshod or shallow than material in "Mamma Mia!" A commercial producer might have a bankable title after lopping off a half-hour from the running time, and hiring a professional director, choreographer, and sound engineer. (During the performance I saw, microphone mishaps rendered nearly all of the song lyrics inaudible or unintelligible.)

In one of the bizarre juxtapositions that the Fringe can foster, the day I saw "Only a Lad," it was preceded at the Harry de Jur Playhouse by "The Unlucky Man in the Yellow Cap." Written in 1982 by J.R. Pick, a Czech Holocaust survivor, the play details his experiences in Terezin, the "model ghetto" set up by the Nazis, which contained many well-to-do and artistic prisoners. The unusual phenomenon that was Terezin — the captives were allowed to produce entertainment relatively free of censorship — has been addressed before on the stage, most recently in Tony Kushner and Maurice Sendek's "Brundibar." Mr. Pick's focus is 1944, just before a series of transports took many of the camp's men away. Interestingly, the protagonist of the title is Norbert, a member of the Ghetto police who spies on his own Jewish people. He is a conflicted character who is hard to warm up to, but whom Lucy, the pretty daughter of an irascible bourgeois couple, grows to love.

Deciphering Lucy's changing feelings is not an easy task; because of some structural and logical lapses in Mr. Pick's play, her behavior is often contradictory. Characterized as prim and snobbish, she nonetheless takes part in a sort of orgy in which young women bid farewell to men about to be transported. There are other

problems with the script. Our narrator is replaced midway after he himself is sent off. This is realistic on Mr. Pick's part, but it is awkward. Moreover, why Mr. Pick, who lived through Terezin, chose to tell this particular story is unclear. The general horror and sorrow of the situation translate (it would no matter how the story of Terezin was told), but the meandering plot and listless direction rob the tale of a more pointed specificity it needs to satisfy as pulsating human drama.

The Devil appears not as Nazi Germany, but as his own humble self in Shel Silverstein's bawdy verse play "The Devil and Billy Markham," which is given a bracing, bare-bones treatment by performer Dave Toomey and director Paul Urcioli. Like his fellow children's book author, Roald Dahl, Silverstein got nasty on the occasions when he laid down his crayon and wrote for adults. Billy Markham is a loser Nashville songwriter, whose only luck is bad and who can't pass up a good wager. When Beelzebub offers to roll the dice for Billy's soul, the redneck naturally loses, albeit with nihilistic style. By and by, however, Billy gets back at Satan (who has a gambling problem himself), besting him in a series of clever cons.

Messrs. Urcioli and Toomey — the latter looks like the shifty son-of-a-sharecropper he portrays — have set some of Silverstein's raunchy, honky-tonk rhymes to music, and Mr. Toomey rattles through both verse and lyrics with a polished panache that, in the often amateurish world of the Fringe, is a delight to behold. He has Silverstein's shaggydog storytelling style down pat, and is ably aided by Mr. Urcioli, a Fringe veteran whose hallmark is clean, actor-centric, no-frills direction. Don't look for too much meaning here, but if pure entertainment is what you're after, give the Devil his due.

For those of you who are intent on meaning, however, you might want to try "A Small Hole," a would-be literary head trip by playwright Julia Jarcho and the collaborative outfit Performance Lab 115. Lab is a good term for this group, because this marriage of Jane Austen and the Marquis de Sade smacks of a grand, avant-garde experiment its creators hoped might result in a potent dramatic potion. Jarcho dissected Austen's least popular work, "Mansfield Park," and inserted bits of Marquis de Sade's play "Justine" to be performed in an amateur theatrical. The quintet of characters don and doff, in lightening exchanges, English country manners and sadistic behavior. The language is artful and oblique, and the acting at a high level from this mercurial and appealing cast. Still, it's doubtful that the text's deeper meanings will be extracted by anyone beyond Ms. Jarcho and some Austen scholars.

That said, the Fringe could use additional works like "A Small Hole" — plays that attempt to be more than amusing, attention-getting, or potentially commercial. Opaque as it is, "A Small Hole" is an artistic endeavor. Most Fringe shows are content to merely take part in the festival; "A Small Hole" means to further the theater in the larger sense. The former is a merry choice, but in the end an empty one.

*Until August 27. Information available at FringeCENTRAL (27 Mercer St., between Grand and Howard avenues,  212-279-4488 ).*