

# Nicholls: Fringe allows seasoned actors to step outside usual roles

BY LIZ NICHOLLS, EDMONTON JOURNAL AUGUST 20, 2013



Michael Peng and Belinda Cornish (seated) and Colin Matty in silhouette in *The Lonely Hearts*

**Photograph by:** Laura O'Connor

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EDMONTON - Talent scouts (and beady-eyed directors) are in hog heaven at the Fringe, of course. What promising up-and-comer actor, new to the scene or on its edges, can resist the lure of a stage and a potential audience of thousands?

But one of the great strengths, and continuing pleasures, of Edmonton's Fringe has always been that you see what experienced actors get up to when they're playing outside the usual constraints and perceptions of the theatre season.

With *A Picasso* (Stage 12, Varscona Theatre, 4 stars out of five), for example, you have the fun of seeing Julien Arnold, a fine, multi-skilled actor who radiates a kind of integrity and honesty that directors have long exploited in their casting, step boldly outside his usual roles.

Arnold goes for the gusto as Picasso in a Jeffrey Hatcher two-hander that gives us a larger-than-life portrait of the artist as monster ego and womanizer, opinionated, grand in his contradictions (passionate but ruthlessly self-absorbed, cagey but imperious ...). Ah, and here's something you didn't know about the much-documented creator of *Guernica*: killer timing with an acidic punch line. Hitler paints? "But he has problems with the borders." It's 1941, and Picasso has been detained in occupied Paris by one Miss Fischer, a crisp and cold-eyed representative of the German ministry of culture, to verify the authenticity of three confiscated (she calls them "abandoned") Picasso sketches. She's played by Shannon Blanchet, in an equally striking departure from her more usual repertoire of witty charmers.

What follows is a skilful cat-and-mouse encounter, with cunningly inserted revelations, judicious quantities of biographical information — and stakes.

Picasso, for example, scorns Miss Fischer's claim that his interrogation is in aid of an upcoming exhibition. In their art, he says, "Germans want kittens and dogs. And Poland." Could you copy the *Mona Lisa*? she demands. "Yes. But you wouldn't recognize her." He wins, and loses, by the truth that she needs a Picasso for a Third Reich public burning of "degenerate art."

Arnold has the juicier assignment, and delivers a knockout turn in John Hudson's production. But Blanchet negotiates the play's more artificially inserted layers, the Nazi with secret cultural sympathies, with dexterity and intelligence. It may be art history lite, but as a vehicle for two compelling actors who know exactly how to careen around corners, it's a highly entertaining ride.

Jana O'Connor's award-winning black comedy *The Lonely Hearts* (Stage 6, C103, 4 stars out of five) has lured two seasoned theatre stars, Michael Peng and Belinda Cornish, outside a more familiar repertoire and performance style, too. The real-life celebs who inspired *The Lonely Hearts* (Stage 6, C103) are a pair of American serial killers in the late '40s, dubbed "the lonely hearts killers" for their tactic of ensnaring women of fortune through a newspaper column.

It's zestfully staged as showbiz by Chris Bullough, an episodic story presented as vaudeville on a self-contained vintage stage with its own bright lights and its own top-hatted emcee (Colin Matty). And that's part of the satirical thrust of the piece, a media circus that focused in a pathological frenzy on the girth of Martha Beck, the "triple-chinned murderess" who found love in the arms of the professional

“bilker” Raymond Fernandez.

Cornish, in a fat suit, plays Martha as a stylized size X-large inflatable kewpie of a girl, with blinking round dolly eyes and no self-esteem to keep her upright.

Just tip her over, watch her legs go up, and she has kids, whom she happily flings offstage in favour of affection. Peng, whom audiences have seen so often shining with intensity and intelligence, is very funny and creepy as Raymond, a vulturous predator with naturally furtive shoulders instead of brain power, and a twitchy appetite for money.

The abrupt exits and entrances (and the lines that accompany each) onto the little puppet stage, floating in a sea of backstage darkness, are part of the macabre comedy of O’Connor’s little stinger of a satire. It unfolds in a staccato succession of staccato moments, annotated by the smiling emcee.

In Bullough’s production, the hands of Cornish and Peng, the heightened, stylized performances add up, curiously, to a certain poignance. Even as she’s being “wedged into Old Sparky,” as the emcee breezily tells us quoting a newspaper story of the day, we realize that Martha herself, the ample pariah, is the real lonely heart.

It can be a disconcerting experience to see what agitprop comedy can do. And it’s way beyond Punch and Judy.

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