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 **Michael Giltz**
Freelance writer

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Theater: Triumphant "Septimus & Clarissa;" Wounded "Crane"

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Two shows opened recently -- *Septimus & Clarissa*, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf's classic novel *Mrs. Dalloway*; and *Crane Story*, a modern spin on the classic folk tale. Both shows are made with care by committed artists and involve a strong emphasis on movement and dance. *Crane* is far less successful than *Septimus* -- one of the best shows of the season, I'm sure -- but it's always nice to see boldness.

SEPTIMUS & CLARISSA *** 1/2 out of ****
BARUCH PERFORMING ARTS CENTER

This is the best adaptation of Virginia Woolf that I've ever seen on stage or screen (including the movie

Orlando, which is brainy fun but not emotional like this show). I love Woolf and especially her two brilliant masterpieces -- *To The Lighthouse* and *Mrs. Dalloway*. Both are modernist classics, though to my modern mind the stream of consciousness seemed perfectly natural, rather than "difficult" or strange as they might have seemed at one time.

You know you're in good hands right from the start: actress and playwright Ellen McLaughlin (the angel in *Angels In America*) is perched on the top of a giant black metal staircase on wheels and the other actors move it around and around in circles across the stage with a spotlight highlighting McLaughlin. It's a bold, visually dazzling image that takes your breath away.

The wonderfully inventive staging by director Rachel Dickstein (who developed the show with McLaughlin and choreographed it with the ensemble) never flags. The story is a simple one: Mrs.

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Dalloway is throwing a party and her errands allow her to reflect on a tepid but pleasant marriage, the infuriating man she might have married, that one passionate kiss with a woman, the aftermath of World War I (it's the early 1920s) and a million other thoughts flitting through the mind of this smart woman of leisure. At the same time, we see the dissolution of shell-shocked war veteran Septimus, whose Italian bride frantically tries to rescue him from a descent into madness.

The paths of Septimus and Clarissa cross repeatedly during the day in unexpected ways, without the two ever actually meeting. This is neatly established by having Septimus (a good Tommy Schridder) walking quickly through a series of doorframes held by other actors and then watching Clarissa step more slowly through those same door frames which are now more widely spaced apart. In one tight sequence we understand that they cross similar paths but never quite intersect. Other nice touches involve tiny houses about three feet tall that move around on wheels; moving them around the stage gives the idea of activity on the streets of the city or of interior scenes with ease.

The novel's quicksilver brilliance is captured brilliantly by the cast. The group often moves in unison, sometimes passing along descriptive passages of the book from person to person. Other times the main characters -- notably Clarissa and her one-time suitor Peter Walsh (Tom Nelis) -- are played by other actors in flashbacks. When those performers speak part of a character's inner thoughts, it creates a wonderful tension and immediacy. Almost everyone plays multiple roles, with Susan Pellegrino and Tom Nelis doing especially marvelous work in creating numerous distinctive characters. But the entire ensemble is strong.

Whether they're all staring up at a plane indulging in the new practice of skywriting or creating a swirl of activity at Mrs. Dalloway's party, the precision and cohesiveness of the group is thrilling. The sound design by Jane Shaw does a great job of using period music to create a mood in concert with the evocative, haunting score by Gina Leishman. The lighting by Keith Parham echoes shifts in time and place with ease, the costumes by Oana Botez-Ban quietly effective (as costumes should be) and the set and property design by Susan Zeeman Rogers spare and smart.

But above all there's McLaughlin as Dalloway. She commands the stage from beginning to end and her script is a marvel. Unquestionably there's some internal logic as to when individuals speak certain passages and others are repeated by the cast as a whole -- it would be a pleasure to dissect the play and see how she did it, how she maintained our patience and absorption during this risk-taking, wholly successful endeavor. Though the title makes clear Septimus will be given his due here more than in the book, a smidgen less of his story would make it more effective. And having seen the show early in the run, it's certain the cast will become only more confident and focused and united as the show continues.

Normally, the smaller the space to see a show in, the happier an audience will be. But this is such a big work in scope and imagination, it might benefit from an even larger space. They've certainly got the play and the talent to fill any theater up. *Septimus & Clarissa* is a treat for fans of Woolf, will send the uninitiated to the pleasures of that novel and is certain to be on my list of the best shows in this very young season.

CRANE STORY ** out of ****



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CHERRY LANE THEATRE

This is a no less bold theatrical gamble. It doesn't pay off like *Septimus & Clarissa*, but talent is clearly on display here as well. The performance piece combines the classic folk tale of a fisherman who falls in love with a crane (unbeknownst to him) with the modern story of a 17 year old Japanese-American boy who commits suicide while visiting Japan. His ghost haunts the street musician who last saw the kid alive until the boy's sister comes from America and dives into the underworld to try and let her brother rest in peace.

The central problem is that this is the story of a teenager who kills himself and ultimately we have no idea why. Shows don't need to "explain" or justify a suicide. It could remain a mystery. But *Crane Story* teases out so many confusing, vague possibilities that in the end you just feel frustrated and cheated. Was Junpei gay and humiliated when he hit on a straight friend? Was he straight and freaked out when hit on by a gay friend? Was he a woman trapped in a man's body? Was he just a gay kid who liked to dress as a girl? Was he a manic depressive? All these ideas are raised -- rather confusingly -- and then dropped with the final vague idea that Junpei worried his sadness might infect others. (Was he ill? Another possibility.) Junpei could remain mysteriously unknowable but the script by Jen Silverman just leaves him a vague, unsatisfying cipher. That's the dramatic hole at the heart of this show, which often looks quite impressive on a technical level.

Surrounding it are some fine performances and inventive puppetry. Angela Lin gets better as the show goes on in her role as the crusading sister. Louis Ozawa Changchien is solid as Ishida, the friend who treats her gruffly and had an altercation with Junpei before the boy killed himself. The fisherman in the folk tale and Skell, the "Librarian" of the underworld are wonderfully created by the team at Puppet Kitchen. Anyone who loves puppetry will enjoy their work here. However, Susan Hyon as the voice of Skell is noticeably weak in defining that imposing creature. Barret O'Brien has an even worse time as Theo, the very poorly written character of the street musician. He has to thrash about for creative inspiration in a scene where Theo is supposed to be writing a song and has an especially meaningless ritual cleansing at the end that is unearned and makes little sense. Christine Toy Johnson is a strong presence as the narrator/Crane. By far the best work is done by Jake Manabat, who almost helps us make sense of the inexplicable Junpei. He's a handsome winning figure as a young man and very pretty as a girl in his scenes with Theo. It's no surprise to see he's already acted in a production of *M. Butterfly*.

The direction by Katherine Kovner is good, aided immeasurably by the clean, effective sets of Michael Locher, the score of composer/sound designer Nathan A. Roberts and the movement design of Miki Orihara and Masumi Kishimoto. They all give *Crane Story* far more weight and seriousness than this mishmash of folk tale and teen suicide ultimately deserves.

The Theater Season 2011-2012 (on a four star scale)

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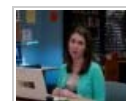
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Note: Michael Giltz was provided with free tickets to these show with the understanding that he would be writing a review.

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