



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 04, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

THEATER: "A(loft) Modulation" -- A Play With Jazz Only Gets The Music Right

(A)LOFT MODULATION * 1/2 out of ****

THE A.R.T./ NEW YORK THEATRES

When you hear about it, you can't help heading to Sixth Avenue between 28th and 29th Street in NYC. In the mid-1950s, acclaimed photographer W. Eugene Smith left a sweet gig at *Life* magazine, moved into a loft at that address and got to work. One neighbor was a teacher at Julliard whose own loft became a de facto jam session and rehearsal space for a rotating cast of jazz musicians including the great (Thelonius Monk, Charles Mingus, Bill Evans) and the never-was (drummer Ronnie Free). Painters like Salvador Dali also swung by.

And Smith documented it all. He relentlessly took photographs from 1957-1965. Of course he captured the jazz greats. But Smith also peeked out his window, meticulously (obsessively?) taking photos of the street life below. As if that weren't enough, he wired the whole damn building for sound, recording everything from the jazz musicians to snatches of conversation to late-night bull sessions about the nature of art. The result? Some 40,000 images and more than 4,500 hours of audio tape.

When writer Sam Stephenson stumbled on this mother-load, he became just as obsessed as Smith, spending years archiving and organizing all this material. The result? A book, a documentary film, a radio series on NPR (what the kids today would think of as a "podcast") and a traveling exhibition.

And now, unfortunately, a play. Jaymes Jorsling saw this ferment of artistic creation and thwarted dreams, this cross-pollination of jazz and photography and art (and literature -- Norman Mailer dropped in, too) and wanted to capture it onstage.



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at mgiltz@pipeline.com

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THEATER: "Terra Firma" Is On Shaky Ground



(Photo by Joan Marcus ©2019)

It's all there in that photo, which accurately captures the jumble of a set and play that is the fictionalized drama with music (A)loft Modulation. The photographer -- heavy-handedly called Myth Williams -- is often stage right, looking at the world outside through a camera lens. Stage left is Steve Samuels, a guy stuck in 2019, unemployed and adrift, hectored by his sensible wife but inexplicably set afire by the "junk" he's discovered in this tumble-down loft. Steve sits there listening to reel after reel of captured conversations and musical performances. A jazz band swings away in the loft positioned above and behind him while junkies and hookers wander around. Endless talk of Art and Life take place, none of it revealing.

The modest storylines (the modern tale of a guy finding purpose in life for the first time, a drummer fighting heroin addiction, a prostitute tentatively enjoying the idea her view of the world might have value) never hold your interest. And yet, you can't help wishing the play would choose one of them and stick to it. Certainly, the sight of a man listening to old audiotapes is inherently undramatic, no matter how often his wife stops to ask exactly what the hell he's doing and why did he quit his job. But while none of the stories are worth hearing more about, it's certainly preferable to the wide-angle approach taken in (A)loft where everything simply happens all at once.

It's a credit to the rich vein of voyeurism and artistry of The Loft Project that it's proven a source for worthwhile efforts on so many platforms from radio to books to a documentary film. Perhaps only the impossibility of getting music clearances has stopped it from producing a boxed set of jazz music. Sure, you can tell any story in any way you want. But a play seems especially unlikely for this particular tale and that instinctive response is borne out here. The jumble of a set, the murky lighting, the stabs at humanity from a cast burdened by clichés, the way the past and present overlap constantly -- it's all in faithful service to the material, but the material is wrong for the stage.

Even the brief dramatic moments that almost work are undercut. At one moment, director Christopher McElroen and his creative team strive to capture the way this loft, this world, was awash in creativity. Photographic images overlay the entire stage, flashing by in a blur. The live band onstage wails away. For a second, you feel the excitement. But then Myth is shown rushing across the stage with a clothesline,

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attaching it from one wall to another and displaying a string of new prints. Then he grabs another clothesline and does it again. The other actors struggle to stay out of the way, the clothesline knocks over this or that prop, it's chaotic and pointless since they'd already captured the energy of the moment...and then Myth runs around to immediately take it all down. As if that weren't enough, he then claps his hand and twirls around in full hep-cat mode. In short, (A)loft Modulation never gets out of its own way. And to add to the irony, it rarely shows any modulation since a vaguely hysterical note of Art! and Ideas! is struck from start to finish.

The one element this show gets right is the music. An original song by Grammy nominee Gerald Clayton opens act two, ably hinting at the magnum opus that Julliard professor is laboring away on. The rest of the night, the action is happily punctuated by the Loft Band, featuring Jonathan Beshay on saxophone, Kayvon Gordon on drums and Adam Olszewski on bass. Whether riffing on classic jazz tunes or heading off into space on pure improvisation, they keep the audience assured that no matter the dramatics, pretty soon they'll be playing again. The Loft Band jams before the play begins, during part of the intermission and throughout the play itself. Like the endlessly philosophizing Myth, the play starts to feel like the person at the back of a club who won't stop talking during a set. You want to shush them up and just keep listening to the band.

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