



FRIDAY, DECEMBER 13, 2019

MICHAEL GILTZ AT WORK

## THEATER: Two Of Our Best Playwrights Return To NYC

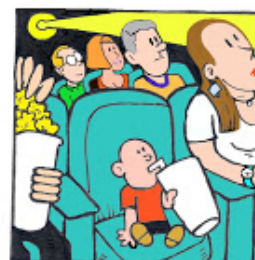
**THE THIN PLACE** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**PLAYWRIGHTS HORIZONS**

**DANIEL KITSON: KEEP** \*\* 1/2 out of \*\*\*\*  
**ST. ANN'S WAREHOUSE**

It's the end of the year, the end of the decade and the lists keep coming. Clearly, I am very aware of what everyone else believes to be the best shows of the decade, but what did I think? Intrigued or bullied or most likely just procrastinating before writing a review (not this one!) I pored over my lists of each and every work of theater I've seen since 2010. Grabbing together all the shows I gave three and a half stars or a very rare four stars, the result was a good pile of stuff and some happy memories.

Certain names popped up again and again: PigPen Theater Co., Philip Glass, Bedlam, Mark Rylance, Harriet Walter, Lucas Knath and Daniel Kitson. [PigPen](#) is a theater company/rock band poised to find its biggest audience yet with their new show *The Tale of Desperaux*. I finally saw all three of [composer Philip Glass's](#) "portrait operas" thanks to remarkable revivals of *Satyagraha* in 2011, *Einstein On The Beach* in 2012 and -- just under the wire -- *Akhnaten* a few weeks ago. [Bedlam](#) created some of the best revivals, pivoted to bold new works and has now fissioned into two companies one hopes will produce twice as much heat. Rylance and Walter are obviously two of the best actors around. And Hnath and Kitson are two of our best playwrights.

Watching Lucas Hnath produce one intriguing, thoughtful, playful work after another; seeing him smartly create pieces that are challenging but easy to produce for companies around the country (he's no fool); marveling as he grew in reputation until his triumphant Broadway debut with the brilliant, Tony-winning *A Doll's House, Part 2* has been a thrill. This is exactly how it's supposed to work.



Michael Giltz is a freelance writer based in NYC and can be reached at [mgiltz@pipeline.com](mailto:mgiltz@pipeline.com)

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[Daniel Kitson](#) creates and performs his own pieces and would likely hide at home rather than appear on Broadway. Like Hnath, Kitson has his own regional support system to try out and refine new pieces. But his goal is not greater and greater attention. He keeps ticket prices and production costs low, always, and that gives him the freedom to do precisely what he wants. The result is a remarkable body of work I might compare to Spalding Gray or Eric Bogosian but that's wrong. It's not confessional or personal; it's certainly not stand-up (which Kitson also does) though I think of him and Eddie Izzard in the same breath. It's work that is uniquely his own -- funny, piercing, deeply human, sneakily complex and open-hearted.

Any time Hnath or Kitson come to NYC with a new show, it's an event. Neither quite sticks the landing in their new piece. But I wouldn't miss either of them, ever.

First, the Hnath.



Lucas Hnath's new play is stripped down to almost the bare essentials. The stage is bare and unadorned. The set consists of two chairs with a small table between them. The cast consists of four actors. But I think it should have been stripped down even more.

Hnath's plays love to explore public performance from scientific debate (*Isaac's Eye*) to the Sunday sermon (*The Christians*) to a reading (*A Public Reading Of An Unproduced Screenplay About The Death Of Walt Disney*). Now with *The Thin Place* he tackles one of the oldest performance genres of all: the ghost story.

Hilda slips onto the stage rather apologetically, carrying a cup of tea. She sits down and begins to talk. A lonely child, a beloved grandmother who played games where they tried to read each other's minds and -- when the grandmother dies -- secret seances where the child Hilda tries to pierce the veil to the other side. She tries and fails to find the thin place, that rare physical location where this world and the next rub shoulders.

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As an adult, Hilda discovers and becomes fascinated by Linda, a real psychic with a gift for talking to those who have passed over. Hilda becomes a devotee and then a disciple and then perhaps a friend of Linda. And as Hilda tells her story, Linda strides onto the stage, almost indifferent to Hilda and us. We are beneath her notice or perhaps merely beside the point. Linda carries the story forward and their onstage pas de deux is intriguing, a little mystifying and even creepy.

Then Linda carefully makes clear to Hilda that what she does isn't exactly real. She doesn't say, "I'm a fraud" exactly. But you can't help sitting up straight and wondering how the gullible and odd Hilda will react to Linda patiently explain how she does what she does. It's a genuine service and provides comfort to her clients. But she's not precisely speaking to the dead so much as telling the living what they desperately want to hear: you are loved, I forgive you, there is something more than this life.

And then two more people burst onto the stage. Jerry and Sylvia are friends of the psychic Linda, which is no surprise since you don't imagine Hilda has any friends to speak of. Suddenly, all sorts of new threads are introduced: Linda is working as a consultant for a politician, Sylvia supports Linda financially and is clearly jealous of Linda's new friendship (and perhaps romance) with Hilda. Just when we get a handle on these interlopers, they fade away and we get back to the purpose at hand, telling a spooky tale.

Despite a few effective bumps in the night, that final story didn't get under my skin. It's easy to imagine Hnath had a two-hander, got stuck and decided to give his story a jolt by having two new characters barge their way in. But a ghost story needs a relentless focus and distractions are not welcome. Since everything Jerry and Sylvia introduce is beside the point, it's a shame Hnath didn't disappear them and stick with what works so well here: the complicated and uncertain relationship between Linda and Hilda.

I think the technical team and director Les Waters gave Hnath everything he wanted, though I'd need to return to the show to decide how I felt about a few abrupt touches. And while it's easy to think Mimi Lien could hardly go wrong with a bare stage, two chairs and a table, they feel like exactly the right two chairs and table. Oana Botez's costumes are also perfectly judged.

As the two interlopers, Triney Sandoval and Kelly McAndrew do what they can with limited roles and no certain purpose. But Emily Cass McDonnell is very good as the unobtrusive Hilda, a character that recedes into the background as much as possible while always making her presence felt. (After a long stretch of saying nothing, when Hilda finally speaks up at a party the effect is hilarious.) And Randy Danson is a treat as the psychic Linda, commanding the stage with aplomb from start to finish. Her British by way of the Caribbean (?) accent wavers a bit, but it doesn't matter. I generously took that as adding to the unreliability of everything Linda says, though the dodgy accent is

not intentional. Danson is wonderful, utterly convincing as she explains away her psychic gifts one minute and just as passionately defends them the next. I can't read minds, but just as Hnath worked again with Laurie Metcalfe I'll bet he'll find another piece to showcase Danson's talents soon.

And now Kitson. He's a busy man, doing stand-up, hosting benefit shows with other comics, deejaying on his local radio station for two weeks every year and traveling the globe doing his "story shows." [His Wikipedia page gives a sense of that prodigious output.](#) I've sadly never seen his stand-up and while gladly catching every single work of theater he's staged in NYC, that still means I haven't seen half of what he's done. So any guess as to the shape of his career is naturally blinkered.

The likely mistaken impression I've received is that increasingly passionate critical raves were a little unsettling to Kitson. Wary of adulation or simply believing his success was coming too easily, he turned his Rube Goldberg-like plays into truly dense Borgesian contraptions. And if god forbid he felt a climax proving too emotional or touching, Kitson ran in the other direction.

Bollocks. His plays have always been dauntingly complex, despite the ease with which he pulls them off. And though it briefly seemed Kitson was trying to make things difficult for himself (one show involved reel-to-reel machines with pre-recorded bits; it didn't work), he's delivered the goods before and since. In 2014 (just five years ago), Kitson created his most open-hearted piece with *A Show For Christmas*. And four of his plays are among my favorites of the 2010s, more than any other artist.

*Keep* won't be on it, but it's often very funny. The stage is bare and plunged into darkness except for a table and chair and behind that a filing cabinet with dozens of drawers containing index cards. Kitson tells us he spent six months cataloguing every single item in his rambling home. Each item gets one index card. And he's going to read them off to us, one by one. It will, he assures, have a fascinating cumulative power but it's not for the faint-hearted. If you want to leave, by all means do so now and you'll get a full refund. And then he begins.

Problems ensue and with them pleasures. The shape of the show slowly reveals itself, along with what seem to be digressions and diversions and casual improvisations. By and large, not a word is wasted since we realize every offhand comment has a purpose. The audience -- fans one and all -- are with him every step of the way, laughing at jokes that are set-up with an aside at one moment and then landed with a quick jab maybe half an hour later. It demands attention and receives it.

Kitson's plays are often labyrinthian pieces, letting us wander through his idiosyncratic worldview. But at the heart of the maze is not some minotaur-like beast, but a willingness to embrace humanity in all its quirks and failings. They often click into place with a delightful snap at

the end, like placing the final piece of a puzzle into place. That doesn't quite happen here, for some stray details muddy the effect and confuse the finale. If I sound like the Emperor in *Amadeus* by declaring *Keep* has "too many drawers!" it's not because the show needs to be shorter, as such. It's because once we know the shape it's taking, filling in the dots should happen as quickly as possible. I'd spend hours in Kitson's brain but once we know where we're going the play needs to get there quicker.

And yet, what a performer. I often think of Kitson the writer and Kitson the wit. But I don't often think of Kitson the actor. His pieces are fiendishly elaborate and difficult; *Keep* might just be the trickiest of all to pull off. A lifetime of stand-up, of delivering complex stories with ease and of winning over an audience to the challenges he's going to set them allows Kitson to be at his best here. *Keep* may not be a keeper, but Kitson along with Hnath remains on the short list of artists I'd follow anywhere.

## THEATER OF 2019

[Frankenstein: Under The Radar Fest at the Public](#) \*\* 1/2

[Minor Character: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\*\*

[Ink: Under The Radar Festival at the Public](#) \*\* 1/2

[Choir Boy](#) \*\* 1/2

[White Noise](#) \*\* 1/2

[Kiss Me, Kate](#) \*\*\*

[Ain't No Mo'](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Ain't Too Proud](#) \*\*

[The Cradle Will Rock](#) \* 1/2

[Mrs. Murray's Menagerie](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Oklahoma! \(on Broadway\)](#) \*\* 1/2

[Socrates](#) \*\*

[The Pain Of My Belligerence](#) \*

[Burn This](#) \*\*

[Hadestown](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[All My Sons](#) \* 1/2

[Tootsie](#) \*\* 1/2

[Ink](#) \*\*\*

[Beetlejuice](#) \*\*

[Estado Vegetal](#) \*\*\*

[Hans Christian Andersen](#) \* 1/2

[Cirque du Soleil: Luzia](#) \*\*\*

[BLKS](#) \*\* 1/2

[Moulin Rouge](#) \*\* 1/2

[Bat Out Of Hell](#) \*\*

[Unchilding](#) \*\*

[Sea Wall/ A Life](#) \*\* 1/2

[Harry Potter and the Cursed Child](#) \*\*\*

[Betrayal](#) \*\*\* 1/2

[Fifty Million Frenchmen](#) \*\* 1/2

[Freestyle Love Supreme](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Derren Brown: Secret](#) \*\*\*  
[\(A\)loft Modulation](#) \* 1/2  
[The Great Society](#) \*\*  
[I Can't See](#) \*  
[Heroes Of The Fourth Turning](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Chasing Rainbows: The Road To Oz](#) \*\*\*  
[The Glass Menagerie](#) (dir Austin Pendleton & Peter Bloch) \*\*  
[Terra Firma](#) (debut of The Coop theater company) \*\*  
[Forbidden Broadway: The Next Generation](#) \*\*\*  
[Dublin Carol](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Soft Power](#) \*\*  
[The Decline and Fall of The Entire World As Seen Through The Eyes Of Cole Porter](#) \*\*\*  
[For Colored Girls](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Scotland, PA](#) \*\*  
[The Sound Inside](#) \*\*\* (great cast, clumsy ending)  
[User Not Found](#) \*\*  
[Enchanted April](#) \*\*  
[DruidShakespeare: Richard III](#) \* 1/2  
[Broadbend, Arkansas](#) \*\*  
[Einstein's Dreams](#) \* 1/2  
[The Crucible](#) (by Bedlam) \*\*\* 1/2  
[Pump Girl](#) \*\*\*  
[A Christmas Carol](#) (Bway w Campbell Scott) \*\*  
[Barber Shop Chronicles](#) \*\*\*  
[Anything Can Happen In The Theater: The Musical World of Maury Yeston](#) \*\* 1/2  
[The Gospel Of John](#) \*\* 1/2  
[The Thin Place](#) \*\* 1/2  
[Daniel Kitson: Keep](#) \*\* 1/2

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POSTED BY [MICHAEL GILTZ](#) AT 6:44 PM 

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