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# Going Under the Radar, and Into the Unknown

By **JASON ZINOMAN**

Some international theater festivals have more resources and bigger names. Others may present more radical work. But the reason that I most look forward to [Under the Radar](#), the scrappy [January showcase](#) presented by the [Public Theater](#), is that it's more likely than any other in the city to present someone exciting I never knew before.

That's a rare pleasure for a reason. Producers of new, adventurous artists need to be able to fail sometimes, but they can't be wrong too often. A string of tedious shows can turn the intrepid theatergoer into a couch potato. Taking risks while keeping the audience in mind requires a delicate balance, and [Mark Russell](#), the director of the festival, has been doing it as well as anyone for decades.

He benefits from a track record that has established trust with audiences. I had never heard of Richard Maxwell, Mark O'Rowe or [Danny Hoch](#) before I saw them at Performance Space 122 in the East Village, which Mr. Russell ran for 21 years. Besides talent, vision and a low budget, these artists have little in common, which speaks to one of Mr. Russell's strengths on display right now: the range of his taste. Featuring a dizzying mix of dance, comedy and experimental theater, [Under the Radar](#), now in its seventh year, resists thematic pigeonholing.

There are familiar faces ([Reggie Watts](#), whose new multimedia mood piece, "Dutch A/V," seems more remote than previous shows) and brand-name imports ([Daniel Kitson's](#) solo "The Interminable Suicide of Gregory Church," Gate Theater's adaptation of Beckett's novel "Watt"). What really distinguishes the festival, however, are the wild cards, the shows that send you home searching the Web to learn more.

For me, the biggest revelation this year is the ferocious Italian company [Motus](#), whose "Too Late! antigone (contest #2)" takes a series of well-worn parts (acting school animal exercises, modern spin on a classic text, meta-commentary) and plays them with such abandon and skill that they feel fresh. Acted (with supertitles) by two swaggering performers, Silvia Calderoni and Vladimir Aleksic, it boils down Greek tragedy to high-stakes power plays communicated in visceral theatrical gestures.

It begins with a very tight hug that in an instant encapsulates the mix of love and violence that characterizes the relationships onstage. Creon (Mr. Aleksic) squeezes his son Haemon (Ms. Calderoni, in drag) standing on the Newman Theater stage, surrounded on either side by audience members sitting close by. This grapple is replayed as a battle between two barking dogs, performed by the same actors with clicking tongues, bared teeth and panting fervor. The beastly soon becomes cerebral.

In between scenes, the poised actors discuss interpretation of character, making connections to contemporary politicians and histories of performance. The simplifying artifice of performance is a theme here, but there is a satiric edge to this intellectualizing, almost as if next to the heated passions of the play, it were beside the point.

Ms. Calderoni, who shifts from Haemon to Antigone, keeps taking off layers of clothes and writing messages on her body, striking a defiant punk figure of naked aggression. By contrast, Mr. Aleksic is evasive and hard to read, occasionally hiding, putting on masks, real and otherwise. His Creon aspires for aloof authority; the production's narrative shows how Antigone shrinks the distance suddenly, racing toward him, back into that firm embrace.

"Too Late!" is hardly conventional, but in the context of experimental theater, there's something almost old-fashioned about its defiant theatricality. Many of the other most ambitious works at the festival lean heavily on video. "Bonanza," conceived and staged by Berlin, a Belgian company comprising Bart Baele, Yves Degryse and Caroline Rochlitz, is a graceful documentary on five adjacent screens portraying a Colorado town with only seven residents.

A miniature set of the town sits above the screens, but the striking cinematography of this desolate landscape, bracketed by the Rocky Mountains, keeps your focus. "Bonanza" begins as an oddly idealized vision of small-town life featuring long stretches of silence and natural beauty, interrupted by its residents' articulately describing the freedom and pleasures of life off the grid.

It's a quiet series of character sketches of real people, but then a plot emerges in the form of a petty political dispute involving the town council, inflamed by local rivalries. This portrait of gossipy small-town life could easily be played for laughs, but the film remains respectful and modest. In the end, it suggests that no matter how alluring leaving society may be, the need for community is universal. "Bonanza" is delicately executed but never entirely persuades you that being mounted as a stage play adds much to the experience over what you would get simply watching this work as a film on a single screen.

The same criticism could be leveled, albeit less convincingly, at "Your Brother.

Remember?," a personal and deceptively complicated study of family relationships wrapped inside an inspired conceit. As a kid growing up in Maine, Zachary Oberzan and his brother made fairly faithful re-enactments of movies, including [Jean-Claude Van Damme's](#) 1989 spin on the "The Karate Kid" formula, "[Kickboxer](#)."

Twenty years later, Mr. Oberzan has recruited his brother to do a re-enactment of the re-enactment. The two films, juxtaposed with the original "Kickboxer," are edited together, showing us voices changed, bodies grown and the pure joy of performance still intact. Along with these films, the show tells the story of the relationship of the brothers through letters and taped interviews. Mr. Oberzan performs some dialogue in person, but most of the show is on screen.

The tone of the piece shifts from silly mockery to earned sentiment as we learn about Mr. Oberzan's brother's drug addiction and imprisonment and how their relationship sustained him. It's a feat that Mr. Oberzan, who also explored his love of 1980s pop culture in "[Rambo Solo](#)," manages to tell a moving story through the film persona of a [robotic action star](#). But the theme he explores with even more depth is the source of artistic inspiration. And while his insights are not original, the way he defends them with video gives the piece a power that is affecting.

For a more bizarre and superficial take on the artistic process, there is "Watch Me Work," a stunt by the justly celebrated playwright [Suzan-Lori Parks](#), who turns herself into performance art, inviting audiences to watch at no charge as she writes at a wooden table in the Public Theater lobby. She tells us nothing about what's she's working on, and her impressive focus amid the chaos of theatergoers coming and going reveals little.

The emptiness of this piece may lead certain overactive imaginations to wander down dark alleys, developing theories about, say, why this [Pulitzer Prize](#)-winning dramatist paused to smile at the banana on her desk. The truth is that unlike watching some painters or actors, seeing a playwright working is deeply boring. Watching [Shakespeare](#) write "Hamlet" would, I suspect, put even [Harold Bloom](#) to sleep.

*Under the Radar continues through Sunday at various New York theaters; [undertheradarfestival.com](#).*