YOU WOULDN'T KNOW it from reading the Times, but American playwriting is undergoing something of a renaissance, and Clubbed Thumb is one of the companies at its center. Founded in 1995 by Meg MacCary and Maria Striar, Clubbed Thumb has, in its 10-year history, nurtured a who’s who of alt-theater, from downtown luminaries like Mac Wellman and Lisa D’Amour to crossover successses like Rinne Groff, to underappreciated geniuses like Sheila Callaghan and Erin Courtney. A good chunk of now-familiar contemporary theater esthetics has arguably been shaped by Clubbed Thumb’s signature style: smart, self-aware, intermissionless plays with good roles for women. Summerworks 2005 is currently running at the Ohio Theater, featuring premieres of new plays by Ethan Lipton, Honour Kane (with Diana Kane) and Ann Marie Healy, and readings of new work by Anna Ziegler and Alice Tuan.

The first of the three plays, Ethan Lipton’s 100 Aspects of the Moon (through 5/14), is a “sad comedy” loosely based on the woodblock prints of 19th-century Japanese artist Yoshitoshi. The production, nimbly directed by Emma Griffin and featuring a formidable ensemble cast, uses anachronism and gentle humor to string together a series of interrelated vignettes. Perhaps best known for his songs—a sort of hipster crooning, or a smarter, funnier and stranger Garrison Keillor for the Greenpoint set—Lipton imbues the Japanese folktales of the prints with a graceful, trenchant cynicism, with frequently hilarious and often profound results.

The second piece, Honour Kane’s Madame Killer (5/15-21), directed by Wier Harman, is a modern take on Victorian melodrama, namely the story of a 19th-century New York abortionist. Thankfully free of didacticism and preciousness, Madame Killer combines pugnacious dark humor with the playwright’s trademark acrobatic language and the relentlessness of a boxing match (which the play in fact contains). Somewhere in between a penny dreadful, a noir and tongue-in-cheek parody, Madame Killer is a propulsive force, cramming 21 manic scenes into fewer than 90 minutes. Rounding out the festival is Ann Marie Healy’s Dearest Eugenia Haggis (5/22-28), directed by Melissa Kievman. Set in the frozen wastelands of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, a world that could just as easily be turn-of-the-century as post-apocalyptic, this play tracks an odd, creepy power struggle between two domestic workers in a blind man’s house. Few playwrights can wield cliché and tin-ear phraseology like Healy: In her hands they’re weapons. This icy, claustrophobic world manages to be simultaneously goofy and eerie.


—Jason Grote
Down at the Ohio, Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks festival again waxes impressive with Ethan Lipton’s “100 Aspects of the Moon.” Mr. Lipton, taking his inspiration from a 19th-century book of woodblock prints, has stitched together a breezy banner of folktales that relate to the moon. With an incredibly successful blend of ancient Japanese forms and modern American diction, Mr. Lipton’s sketches of suicidal lovers, bewildered archers, and inappropriately amorous flower-lovers inspires a little lunacy of its own.

Emma Griffin’s direction, gentle and insistent as a stiff breeze, moves an excellent cast through the stories with economy and charm. Naming those doing good work would simply amount to a complete cast list, but April Matthis’s gender-bending brilliance and Matthew Mayer’s sleep-deprived husband deserve special mention.

“She Stoops to Conquer” until June 16 (132 W. 22nd Street, between Sixth and Seventh Avenues, 212-727-2737).

“100 Aspects of the Moon” until May 14 (66 Wooster Street, between Spring and Broome Streets, 212-966-4844).
SUMMERWORKS 2005

Clubbed Thumb, one of New York's classiest theater groups, recently celebrated its 10th anniversary by announcing a $15,000 grant for new dramatists. With a decade of well-mounted professional productions behind it, Clubbed Thumb can take credit for developing and promoting a slew of new, mostly female, playwrights.

Clubbed Thumb's three-play Summerworks Festival kicks off this year with 100 Aspects of the Moon, by the charismatic singer/songwriter/playwright Ethan Lipton, directed by Salt Theater's Emma Griffin, and it winds down with Ann Marie Healy's Dearest Eugenia Haggis, directed by Melissa Klawman. In the middle slot they have Madame Killer, an historical drama which examines the life of a controversial abortion doctor who lived and practiced in New York at the turn of the 19th century. The play is written by Honour Kane with Diana Kane, and directed by Wier Harman. "It's a period piece based on events from the life of the notorious Madame Restell, who was a famous abortionist of her time," notes Harman. "She went to jail a couple of times for it, and even advertised her services on the back pages of the Herald; she became well-known and rich, and built a house on 53rd and Fifth Avenue across from the Vanderbilts."

The height of Restell's notoriety was in the 1870s. After she died in 1878, everyone wanted to know what was in the black book in which she had detailed her various services over the years. "The black book held the dirt on every significant politician and society person in New York at the time," says Harman. "In our play, which is a salacious nasty little melodrama, we use her character in key events of her life, but we also cast her as a 'governess of the underworld,' because she ran illegal gambling activities and marketed quack pharmaceuticals."

The Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St., (212) 868-4444. 100 Aspects of the Moon, May 8-10 & 12-14; Madame Killer, May 15-17 & 19-21; Dearest Eugenia Harris, May 22-24 & 26-28. All shows at 8 p.m. $12 & $15.
Theater Review: 100 Aspects of the Moon

It's not summer yet (as the stupid weather of the past few days has pointedly reminded us) but Clubbed Thumb is getting a jump on the season and its glut of festivals by staging its own while there's a relative lull. On Sunday, Gothamist attended the opening of the company's tenth Summerworks festival, which features three plays, and if 100 Aspects of the Moon was any indication, this anniversary year is one you definitely shouldn't miss. Clubbed Thumb also has an annual "boot camp" in which it workshops new plays, and this first play of the three in Summerworks 2005 was boot-camped last November.

Maybe playwright Ethan Lipton already had his creation in good shape beforehand, but the quality of 100 Aspects of the Moon certainly speaks well for the boot camps and for Clubbed Thumb in general. Their mission statement says they aim to produce "funny, strange, and provocative new plays," and 100 Aspects is all three, as well as being highly enjoyable.

With a sparse set and actors portraying multiple characters over the course of 90 minutes, the play brings to life 11 of the 100 prints in a series by Japanese wood-block printmaker Yoshitoshi. Lipton clearly has a fantastic imagination to be able to draw as much as he has from these; like much traditional Japanese art, a lot is left out of the picture and just hinted at in Yoshitoshi's masterpiece, which he produced between 1885-1892.

A few of the tableaux in Lipton's live version are like this: a woman sings softly by the light of the moon, a regally robed man circles the stage as servants shower some sort of petal or dust on him. There are also stories told in a single scene, like that of the hilariously hyperactive little boy Mitchi (Joanna Adler, who has his energy pitch-perfect) whose parents have competing visions for his future. Others more strongly resemble fables or myths, and are acted out in bits throughout the show. Probably the best is the one that provides the beginning and ending, in which Hou Yi (the terrifically funny Matthew Maher) rescues the moon and receives an elixir for eternal life, only to have the elixir snatched from him by his wife, Chang E. (Kate Hampton) who is later turned into a frog. Another well-executed recurring piece has a haughty princess (Joanna Adler again) playing hard-to-get with a captain (Tim Kang, the only Asian actor in the bunch).

Almost anyone would have had to take a lot of liberties with Yoshitoshi's 100 Aspects to put it on stage, and Lipton's version, with mostly white actors wearing modern clothes and using American slang and obscenities, does so unapologetically, and successfully. Any cognitive dissonance you might experience in seeing classical Japanese themes brought to life by off-off-Broadway performers is outweighed by the comedy that results, and by the many oddly beautiful moments that show up throughout its length.

Summerworks 2005 continues for three weeks, with 100 Aspects being followed by Honour Kane's Madame Killer and then Ann Marie Healy's Dearest Eugenia Haggis, which both also appear to be based in the 19th century but, if 100 Aspects is representative, will be anything but stiff and Victorian. In addition this week and the last week of the festival Clubbed Thumb hosts free readings of two plays in its current boot camp: Anna Ziegler's Everything You Have (May 11) and iggy woo, by Alice Tuan (May 25).

Details: Summerworks is at the Ohio Theatre, 66 Wooster St. All shows are at 8pm. 100 Aspects shows through May 14, except for May 11; Madame Killer will show from May 15-21, except for May 18; and Dearest Eugenia Haggis will show from May 22-28, except for May 25.

Posted by Mallory Jensen in Review, Theater | Print
Intriguing 100 Aspects of the Moon Opens
Clubbed Thumb Opens Summerworks 2005

Clubbed Thumb, Inc.

Until encountering Ethan Lipton’s 100 Aspects of the Moon, which is the first entry in Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks 2005 series at the Ohio Theater, I’d never heard of a nineteenth century Japanese woodblock printmaker named Yoshitoshi, or known anything about the stories that he immortalized in a series of over 100 prints during his lifetime.

Thankfully, Lipton has taken 11 of the stories from these prints and pieced them together in the intriguing “Aspects”, a sort of theatrical collage that feels beautifully exotic and of another era while also being strikingly contemporary in their ironic view of human nature and the foibles of love in all of its many incarnations.

In the plot strands that Lipton has chosen, audiences will find vignettes that are stand-alone, such as a brief interlude in which a father tries to spurn his son to write a poem, by promising him a great future as one of Japan’s foremost poets. The father’s ploy works, but when the mother answers another question from the boy, “When are you and daddy going to die?”, by saying it won’t be for a long time and that he’ll be able to feast on as many wonderful meats as he’d like at their funeral, the father asks if she’s trying to make the boy crazy.

Lipton allows other stories in the piece to unfold in small scenes throughout the evening, which gives “Aspects” a strong dramatic pull and grounding chord. These pieces include a story about one of the Emperor’s bowmen and his talkative wife. “Aspects” opens with him berating her for waking him to simply talk. Later, after he’s returned from accomplishing wonders for the Emperor, she listens, but only self-centeredly, and she ultimately usurps his reward from the gods. When she’s punished, the wife learns the true meaning of the art of listening.

Emma Griffin’s production unfolds on Tom Gieson’s nearly bare stage. For various scenes, the performers will arrange blocks of wood (a choice nod to the play’s source) as, for example, a small garden fence, or as chairs. Mark Barton’s lighting, alongside the blossoms that dot the columns lining the theater’s stage, provides additional atmosphere, particularly his striking moonrises on the cyclorama at the back of the deep stage. By using intricately woven satins in some costumes, designer David Zinn evokes the play’s Eastern roots even as he ensures that the costumes maintain an appropriate timelessness.

Griffin’s seven-member ensemble, playing multiple roles, acquires itself with grace throughout. Joanna P. Adler creates a charming portrait of the little boy who’s buoyed by Chris Wells’ starry-eyed father and Tim Kang’s more down-to-earth, yet loving, mother. Adler and Kang play off one another marvelously in another story in the piece, where an imperious poet (Adler) spurns the genuine love of a captain who resolves to spend a 100 nights at her door by which time he is certain she will love him. Audiences familiar with any form of long term relationship will find portions of themselves and partner in Matthew Maher and April Mathis’ strikingly honest portrayals of the bowman and his wife. Gibson Frazier’s rendering of a self-centered noble, with a habit of over-using love (both the word and the emotion) makes for one of the evening’s comic highpoints as well as one of its most poignant.

During the balcony scene in Romeo and Juliet, one hears Juliet admonish her lover that he should “Swear not by the moon”, as she fears its inconstancy. It’s amazing how in 100 Aspects of the Moon, Lipton makes the mutability of this satellite and of human nature so immensely enjoyable.

100 Aspects of the Moon continues through May 14 at the Ohio Theater (66 Wooster Street). Performances are Thursday through Saturday at 8pm. Ticket are $15 and can be purchased by calling 212-868-4444. Further information is available online at www.clubbedthumb.org.

-- Andy Propst
100 Aspects of the Moon is a new play by Ethan Lipton, being presented as one of the three mainstage productions of this year's Summerworks festival from Clubbed Thumb theatre company. Inspired by the work of 19th century woodblock-printmaker Yoshitoshi, it's described as "a very sad comedy about the regularly scheduled failings of humanity. Deep-seeded resentment, lousy communication, and misplaced love and violence ensue."

nytheatre.com review
Martin Denton • May 9, 2005

A provincial archer is summoned by the Emperor to rescue the Moon, which has been taken hostage. A captain falls in love with an obstinate poetess who has renounced romance and vows to stand outside her window wooing her for a hundred days. A poor man brings his aged mother to the top of a mountain to die.

These are just a few of the many stories contained in Ethan Lipton's magical new play 100 Aspects of the Moon, which is being presented by Clubbed Thumb as part of its Summerworks festival. All of the stories are inspired by the work of Yoshitoshi, a Japanese woodblock printmaker who died in 1892. Like the prints themselves (which you can see some examples of here), the vignettes are exotic, colorful, bold, and fragmentary—some are presented in phases while others play themselves out quickly and disappear. All blend, provocatively, modern-day American pop culture references with Japanese mythology and traditions (the play reminded me of the works of Chiori Miyagawa in this regard), so that a defeated Japanese warrior about to commit hara-kiri is attended by a servant who spouts colloquialisms and wears a "Pink Floyd" t-shirt. All mix humor—quirky wit and bald slapstick—with a more contemplative poetic style of writing. The best are stunningly lyrical and moving.

What's the purpose of this excursion into Japanese culture by way of American pop? Lipton and his director, Emma Griffin, never really make the answer clear. I took it to be a sort of zen thing: it just is.

Griffin's staging parallels the script's mix of styles, incorporating some breathtaking Eastern theatrical effects (like a chorus of stagehands holding long-handled baskets from which they delicately sift paper snowflakes to create a snowstorm). Transitions between the scenes usually involve cast-members rearranging the wood blocks that constitute the main "set" for the show (the imaginative,
stark design is by Tom Gleeson); this generally seemed to take longer than felt right to me—is there a more elegant way to move the pieces around, I wonder?

Seven actors portray some two dozen roles, offering some grand challenges and opportunities to them. Matthew Maher is splendid as the homely archer, Hou Yi, whose reward for rescuing the Moon turns out to be a gift from the gods. He's also fine as Kamuro, a little boy who has apparently been adopted by a geisha or prostitute following the deaths of his parents. April Matthis is excellent as the prostitute and also as the Old Mother being carried up the mountain by her son, Skinny; and Gibson Frazier excels as Skinny and as Hidetsugu, the defeated warrior who must commit ritual suicide. Kate Hampton is terrific as Hou Yi's grasping wife, Chang E. Rounding out the cast are Tim Kang (whose is equally at home playing a Japanese housewife, the lovelorn captain, and a blind warrior), Chris Wells (best as the housewife's expansive husband), and Joanna P. Adler (who shines as their son, Mitchi). I wondered why Kang's cross-gender casting was included, as it's the only instance in the play.

100 Aspects of the Moon is dazzlingly theatrical and richly entertaining, and that proves to be enough for a highly satisfying evening. It will be interesting to see if the play is developed further beyond this new works festival; I'd certainly want to see where it goes from here.

Last Updated: May 15, 2005
show listings: plays
Madame Killer

Madame Killer is a new play by Honour Kane with Diana Kane, being presented as one of the three mainstage productions of this year's Summerworks festival from Clubbed Thumb theatre company. It's described as a "Gothic noir about Ann Lohman who, upon her death in 1978, was a paradigm of capitalism, worth millions... but she had secrets. This fair doctor owned a black book filled with incriminating evidence about all the women she serviced over the year, striking fear in both rich and poor if this information ever got out."

nytheatre.com review
Jo Ann Rosen - May 16, 2005

There are many things to like about Madame Killer, the second of three plays in Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival. Among them are the historic story behind the drama, the structure of the script, most of the performances, the ambitious costumes, and the simple yet effective sets. The rapid pace, alone, might be the most ambitious part of the whole production, as director Wier Harmon presses the cast to keep the story moving at lightning pace and the sets moving seamlessly between scenes.

The story tracks four characters whose paths cross with a notorious New York abortionist, popularly known as Madame Killer. Hannah, a poor African American, and Nuala, a poverty stricken Irish immigrant, earn their pittance from one of Madame Killer's gambling sidelines, female boxing. With the help of Madame Killer, Hannah discards all traces of poverty and sets up a profitable dressmaker's shop for the smart set. In return, Hannah refers a steady stream of rich clientele to Madame Killer. One of these clients is Vicky, a one-time prostitute who fights her way in to respectability by marrying Wolver, a slippery man whose unchecked ambitions will fit nicely into Tammany Hall once he acquires the necessary accoutrements—wife, children, and a fancy apartment on the Vanderbilts' block of Fifth Avenue. He desperately wants children, mostly out of jealousy for his brother and his brood. But Vicky, irreparably harmed by Madame Killer's stitchery, cannot bear children. Of course, Wolver doesn't know this. Vicky employs Hannah to design a garment that expands monthly, and strikes a deal with Madame Killer to adopt one of the babies that would otherwise be aborted. The opportunity comes swiftly after the poor Irish girl Nuala is raped. Nuala refuses to carry her baby to term, but changes her mind when Madame Killer offers her what Nuala thinks is an enormous amount of money. The story packs a punch, and while it takes place in 1878, the drama seems very relevant to today's heated pro-life/choice
political debate, demonstrating how the legal system does nothing for the abstinence argument, rather it forces both rich and poor to seek back alleys.

Maria Porter as Madame Killer grabs the stage with the calm and authority of someone who knows exactly what her character is about. The other characters never sail far from her pier in pursuing their ambitions, and by the end of the play they are securely tethered to her dock. Her little black book assures that.

Aedin Moloney distinguishes herself as Nuala, filling the stage with energy and fight. Assuming a nearly indecipherable Irish brogue, she makes her intentions quite clear. In one emotional tirade, she accuses Madame Killer, who is helping her learn proper English, of taking everything she has. Pointing to her mouth, she says “Dublin lives in here” and she refuses further English lessons. It is one of the most poignant moments of the play. Moloney’s thin frame and shaggy hair give her the necessary impoverished look, particularly next to Porter’s healthy, solid frame.

Mark Shanahan delivers a salacious Wolver. He adds complexity to the role with a final rage so authentic that the audience actually gasps. Marsha Stephanie Blake transitions nicely into the dressmaker from a female boxer. Her beautiful costume, by Katherine Hampton Noland, contributes considerably. Melinda Wade also gains her footing as Vicky after a weak opening scene.

The play opens with Vicky and Wolver striking a marriage deal. However, before we know this, questions arise. Wade speaks with a Southern drawl, a bad one. Does she mean to dupe Wolver? Let the audience in on her plot? Soon we learn that they are both ambitious and without scruples. This should be clear up front. Also, certain details don’t add up. If Vicky hopes to reach the top, she will, at least minimally, have to stand up straight and brush her hair. After all, this is 1878, and the women wear sweeping gowns with corsets, stays, and plenty of crinolines. Wade becomes more credible in her role once her character acquires riches. While the story gets off to a slow start, the play quickly redeems itself.

The parallel structure of the play, written by Honour Kane with Diana Kane, contributes to the complexity of the story. Two characters appear, and then two more until the lives of the characters are inextricably interwoven. The scenes are an exercise in efficiency. Susan Barras creates the needed ambience for a parlor, a backroom, and an outdoor carriage ride, each with a single prop: a bed, a desk, and two connecting chairs. It works beautifully, because each one slides on and off the stage before the audience is aware of it, and because Paul Whitaker’s lighting is precise and right on cue. Noland’s costumes add depth and keep the story grounded in the 19th century. There is an extravagant mix of colors and textures in the full, floor-length day dresses. They contrast nicely with the restraint used in Madame Killer’s attire and in the worn sweater favored by Nuala. Paul Loesel’s piano compositions reinforce time and place and add emotional intensity to the scenes. Jonathan Rose is at piano.

Director Wier Harman delivers this unusual drama with impeccable pace. There is no time for yawning—not that you would want to. He delivers a vivid period piece that holds the audience until the actors take their bows.

Last Updated: May 22, 2005
show listings: plays
Dearest Eugenia Haggis

Dearest Eugenia Haggis is a new play by Ann Marie Healy, being presented as one of the three mainstage productions of this year's Summerworks festival from Clubbed Thumb theatre company. The play is about three misfits scrambling for the scraps of love in the frozen outskirt. Healy's prior works include Now That's What I Call a Storm and Somewhere Someplace Else.

nytheatre.com review
Martin Denton • May 23, 2005

Ann Marie Healy's new play Dearest Eugenia Haggis, which is part of Summerworks 2005, Clubbed Thumb's mini-new-works festival, focuses on three eccentric characters. Two of them are women—the title character, a plainspoken (and plain-looking) middle-aged lady who is as stubbornly intolerant of others' foibles as she is blindly unaware of her own; and the much younger Pauline Khenghis, a dreamy and perennially unhappy schemer who seems to understand that she's already irrevocably stuck in a rut from which she is unwilling and/or unable to extract herself. Both compete, more or less, for a stable future working for Blind Johnny Knoll, whose main attribute is described in his name. Healy sets up a kind of contest between the two women, and though their respective psychological baggage would seem to result in an even match, the outcome is anything but a draw. That said, it shouldn't surprise you that no one seems to win, either.

It's a bleak world depicted in this play; Healy coyly describes it in the program as "Someplace very far away from many things; almost everything. Most definitely the furthest outskirt of a tiny copper town called Calumet in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan." This same kind of cutesy indecisiveness pervades the entire show: we're aware that Healy is trafficking in the saddest and deepest reaches of loneliness in spinning this tale, but at the same time she keeps pulling back and away, almost postmodernly, calling attention to the folly of her creations in jarringly whimsical ways. Pauline lapses into self-conscious daydream/fantasies in which she darts about the small house like a vampire or some other B-movie monster; for Eugenia, Healy has devised an equally self-conscious set of speech patterns and catch phrases that make her sound like a cliché patchwork of '30s-era maiden lady next-door neighbors (think Margaret Hamilton as Miss Gulch, but not so malevolent). The effect of this is to intentionally distance us from a story that might otherwise be allowed to touch us; I'm not sure why Healy wants to do this.
I'm not sure, either, why Healy navigates her story the way it finally wends. Pauline, already employed by Blind Johnny Knoll when Miss Haggis arrives in the household, launches a cunning and dirty campaign to get rid of her rival. We think that Eugenia will respond in kind; at first, she almost does. But then the balance of power tilts fairly decisively in one direction—and everyone involved is sent, almost as if by an otherworldly force, to an existential, possibly deserved, destiny.

The ending feels enigmatic, deliberately so. This all by itself is very likely Healy's modest point in this play. I'm not sure it's sufficient payoff for what comes before; I do know that because Healy seems so determined to keep us from empathizing with any of her characters that I finally didn't much care what happened to any of them.

*Dearest Eugenia Haggis* has been given an almost lavish mounting by Clubbed Thumb, particularly given the festival setting. Raul Abrego's set, consisting of a couple of rooms in Blind Johnny's home, is detailed and interesting; Josh Epstein's lighting is similarly vivid and evocative, and costumes by Anne Kenney provide a period flavor that Healy occasionally works against (why?) in her writing. Melissa Kieyman's staging is precise and thoughtful. Matthew Cowles and Caitlin Miller as Blind Johnny Knoll and Pauline Khenghis create intriguing, fully-fleshed-out characters. Special mention needs to be made of Mara Stephens, as Eugenia Haggis, who stepped into the role less than a week before opening night and performs with almost miraculous assurance; even though occasionally still on book, she dominates the proceedings and makes the title character of this unusual and perhaps under-written play someone we wish we could know much, much better.

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Last Updated: May 29, 2005