The New York Times

Review: A Shaggy Fish Story With a Bounty of Questing Heroines

By BEN BRANTLEY | JUNE 9, 2017 | NYTimes Critic's Pick

From left, Emily Davis, Socorro Santiago and Stacey Yen in Alex Borinsky's "Of Government." Photograph by Ian Douglas for the New York Times

"Darling, it's better down where it's wetter," sang the calypso crab to the fishtailed heroine of Disney's "The Little Mermaid" in 1989, hymning the joys of ocean-floor habitation. Nearly 30 years later, another set of aquatic creatures, wearing homemade tulle seaweed and sequin scales, have shown up to acknowledge that life under the sea isn't so great these days.

Then again, is life all that great anywhere on this dangerous planet? Does it harbor anything like a snug, secure place to call home? As the performers in the endearingly amateur "Little Mermaid"-style musical pageant now at the Wild Project warble (a tad raggedly), imperfection and uncertainty are everywhere.

So begins "Of Government," Alex Borinsky's seriously shaggy (scaly?) fish story of a play, which is enacted by a delightful all-female ensemble of odd women out, and directed by Jeremy Bloom. But don't let yourself feel too at home with that community-style underwater fantasy environment, charming though it may be.

For no sooner does our latter-day mermaid finish her aria of farewell than this aqueous dream world is dismantled before our eyes. (All of Carolyn Mraz's sets are am-dram delights, as are Heather McDevitt Barton's costumes.) It's a chaotic process, and you may find yourself looking to the one person who seems to be in charge: that nice lady playing the upright piano just in front of the stage, who had earlier led us in a prologue of grade-school chanting exercises.

Her name is Ms. Marjorie Blain, and though as portrayed by Beth Griffith, she has the sweetest smile, don't expect too much in the way of guidance from her. Like that questing mermaid, and the succession of other uprooted women we will meet during the next 80 minutes or so of this second entry in the Clubbed Thumb Summerworks festival of experimental theater, you're entirely on your own.

That means going with the flow of a globe-crossing plot that is as twisty and slippery as a .... Well, I was going to say "an eel," but since that mermaid stuff is more or less ditched after the opening, I'd better find a new set of similes.

True, the show's opening musical number will be referred to later in the play. In fact, a young woman who apparently saw the same production we did winds up reciting that entire mermaid scene, verbatim, partly under her breath.

That's Heidi, who works for an Arby's in a small Montana town, and spends her down time creating flocks of origami birds (cranes, to be exact) bearing messages of peace; she also has plans to run for county commissioner. And as drolly embodied by the downtown veteran Emily Davis, Heidi glimmers shyly with sui generis eccentricities.

Heidi also helps out Barb (Socorro Santiago), who presides over the one-room Montana schoolhouse in which the second part of “Of Government” takes place. Sadly, that school is about to be shut down.

In the meantime, the rudderless Debbie (Stacey Yen) has come to visit Barb, hoping to figure out her life in rural tranquillity. But there’s no peace to be had, thanks to ominous interruptions by the crazy-talking meth head Tawny (a scary Keilly McQuail) and a Debbie-seeking drone.

So onward, everybody, to a hotel in Switzerland, where Debbie is vacationing with her understandably worried mother, Sharon (Mia Katigbak). There they meet a seemingly proper and restrained Englishwoman, Joan (a wonderful Beth Dixon), who tells a woeful and epic-length saga of small-town grocery shopping.

But wait! This mountain air idyll is interrupted by the arrival of a helicopter, bearing the insanely rich (and possibly just insane) Heather (Donnetta Lavinia Grays, hilarious). And then we go back to Montana, where Heidi meets a jogger from New York (Melle Powers, previously seen as our leading mermaid).

“What had the point been? There must have been some point?” Those aren’t my questions; they come from the epilogue of a song that concludes “Of Government.” (And please don’t ask me to explain that title here.)

Me, I see a point in this play’s amiable restlessness, or I think I do. It’s something to do with both the insecurity and serendipity of the way we live now. And the meandering flow of the plot feels appropriate for the beginning of the silly season, when thoughts turn to fantasies of flight and contemplation of the ruts we’re stuck in.

“Of Government” has the appeal of one of those wayward trips to nowhere people find themselves craving when the weather turns warm, preferably in an open convertible at lazy speeds. You sit back as the scenery changes, sometimes quite unexpectedly, and get to meet a whole lot of interesting strangers along the way — in this case, what is surely the most likably idiosyncratic assortment of women gathered on a New York stage.

Review: Small Mistakes With Big Consequences in 'The World My Mama Raised'

By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES | MAY 24, 2017

(Excerpt – read the full review at nytimes.com)

Throughout the first half of "The World My Mama Raised," a social-justice comedy of sorts by Ariel Stess that kicks off Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks series, a young black prisoner named Henry stands in his cell upstage, mostly silent, often reading. Though he's wearing a bright yellow uniform, it's easy to forget he's there.

From Left, Zoë Geltman and Ronald Peet in "The World My Mama Raised" Photograph by Elke Young

The incarceration of African-American men for nonviolent crimes, and the consequent derailment of their lives, is a main concern of this quietly frenzied play, directed by Kip Fagan with a distancing, cockeyed surreality at the Wild Project. Its second half is about Henry's post-prison attempt to get back on track: finish his education, find an employer willing to take a chance on a felon. With grimy, water-stained walls that look like the inside of a cardboard box, Arnulfo Maldonado's set gives you a clue about how that will go.

But the early parts aren't nearly that focused. Ms. Stess, whose 2015 "Heartbreak" inhabited a similarly heightened dramatic world, has a weakness for abundance over clarity. Here she is intent on depicting a whole system of American inequality — educational, economic, legal — that deems some lives valuable and others expendable, though there is an antic dimension to this darkness.

The teenage Violet (Reyna de Courcy), who is brainy but poor, doesn't realize just how much the odds are stacked against her. Violet's illiterate father (Danny Wolohan) gently urges caution, though, when he suspects she's having sex. "You want a baby right now to take to algebra with you?" he says.

Amid the wacky hodgepodge of a dozen characters — including the weed-dealing child of privilege Albert (Ethan Dubin), whose egregiously affected speech is typical of the rich kids here — Violet and Henry take a while to emerge as the heart of this play. Smart and promising, each of them commits a youthful error.

For Henry (the excellent Ronald Peet), it was the one day of pot dealing that landed him in prison. For Violet, it's getting pregnant — a development represented not by a bulging belly but by a large, pointed rock that Ms. de Courcy carries in front of her abdomen from that moment on. It is a potent image, and one of the most inventive elements of Ms. Stess's script.

Another is at the end of the first section, when a subdued scene between Violet and her friend Tina (Zoë Geltman) repeats for a couple of minutes during a set change. Violet's life, too, is changing.

"Have you done your dropout forms yet?" Tina asks her.

"Not yet," Violet says.

"You should probably switch from doing homework to working on your dropout forms," Tina says.

Ms. Stess does interesting things with repetition as the play goes on, and she also turns racial profiling on its head, with the police charging hard against whites. Other events are less successfully contrived in service of a political point.

THE NEW YORKER

In Heidi Schreck's New Play, Teen Girls Talk About the Constitution

By Sarah Larson | June 26, 2017

The writer and actor Heidi Schreck. Photograph by Elke

On a recent Thursday, in a sunny rehearsal space downtown, the playwright, actor, and TV writer Heidi Schreck stood near a lectern draped with red-white-and-blue bunting. She was rehearsing a work in progress, "What the Constitution Means to Me," onstage now at the Wild Project, in Summerworks, Clubbed Thumb's annual festival of new plays. She spoke to the audience with friendly authority. "When I was in high school, I earned all the money I eventually used to pay for college by doing speeches about the Constitution across the country," she begins. "I would travel from American Legion hall to American Legion hall, in big cities like Denver or Sacramento, to give speeches about the Constitution, win the money, and put it in a safe-deposit box." Her competing in the American Legion's lucrative annual competition was a scheme cooked up by her parents, a high-school debate coach and a high-school history teacher, to help her gain confidence and tuition money at once.

Schreck goes on, "In my memory, usually at the first stage I would be in the bar of an American Legion hall, and there would be guys sitting out there in full uniform smoking cigars." A tiny set model of an American Legion hall in her home town, Wenatchee, Washington, sat on a table in front of the director, Oliver Butler. "You're welcome to imagine that cigar smoke is hovering," she says. Schreck's previous plays have been set in much different realms the Middle Ages, a soup kitchen in the Bronx but she writes and performs autobiographically with ease.

Schreck went to the University of Oregon; moved to Siberia and taught English; worked as a journalist in St. Petersburg, Russia; then made her way in the theatre world, in Seattle and in New York. An Obie-winning performer, she has been making a transition to writing in recent years. Her play "Creature" was staged at the Ohio Theatre in 2009, while she was performing in Annie Baker's "Circle Mirror Transformation" at Playwrights Horizons. For a time, in the summer of 2013, she was writing for "Nurse Jackie" by day and acting in the Shakespeare in the Park production of "The Comedy of Errors" by night. ("It was very hard, but I do

remember thinking that maybe my life would never get any better," she said, laughing.) Her play "Grand Concourse," directed by her husband, Kip Fagan, was produced at Playwrights Horizons in 2014; she's writing a play called "The Maritime," for the Atlantic Theatre Company. She also wrote for "Billions" and for "I Love Dick" a gig that yielded unusual acclaim.

"A Short History of Weird Girls," the fifth episode of "I Love Dick," which Schreck co-wrote with Baker, feels like a revelation, and has been widely celebrated as such. ("Whip smart, radical, keen and poignant, it is the best 20 minutes of television I've seen in years," Alexis Soloski wrote in the Times.) It explores women's memories of girlhood and their developing sexuality brilliantly, powerfully, and with humor, putting female sexual desire at the center of the narrative in a way that, even though it's 2017, feels new, and, indeed, radical. Schreck recently sold a series to the Sundance Channel based on another feminist and sexually forthright book, Mary Gaitskill's "Bad Behavior."
Schreck has been thinking about and developing "What the Constitution Means to Me" for the past decade. Her experience of giving Constitution speeches in high school is something she keeps thinking about without fully understanding why, she says in the show. It was a time when she was discovering a power she hadn't fully realized she had, fuelled by adrenaline and justice. "The contest itself was one of the most pleasurable things in my life as a teen-ager," she told me. "I really took to it."

In the contest, she is asked to choose a metaphor for the Constitution and also to connect it to her own life. Re-creating a speech she gave at fifteen, in 1989, she compares the Constitution to a crucible. "You put ingredients in there, like ferrous alloys or lobsters, and boil them all up together until they make something else," she says. Her speech is funny and smart, characterized by lively teen-aged kookiness. It's full of words like "sweaty," "murky," and "penumbra." Schreck performs it with relish. You can detect the zeal she had then and the fond amusement she has now. In talking about the Constitution, Schreck invokes rainbows, Spud Webb, Reba McEntire, Thurgood Marshall, Wonder Woman's bracelet, the imagined prevention of rape and murder, personhood, cauldrons, and swimming fairies.

"A crucible is also a severe test of patience or belief," she says. "The Constitution can be thought of as a boiling pot in which we are thrown together in sizzling and steamy conflict to find out what it is we really believe." She draws a connection from Dred Scott and the Constitution's slow progress on the path out of slavery to Fourteenth Amendment issues of citizenship, rights, and equal protection of the laws, describing historical people of Wenatchee and delving into regional history around the time of her great-great grandparents.

"One tricky thing about the Fourteenth Amendment is that it doesn't say who gets to become a citizen or why," she says. As a result, the "whims of lawmakers" decide who is a desirable immigrant. Her great-great grandmother, a mail-order bride who came to Washington State from Germany, in 1879, was considered a good immigrant, she tells us, because the male-to-female ratio in Washington State was nine to one. (There were many schemes to bring women there; she tells an incredible "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers"-like story of an audacious quest to bring five hundred women from back east to marry Seattle-area loggers, on a ship finagled from D.C. politicians.) But life for such women was very hard once they got to Washington State. Schreck's great-great grandmother died of "melancholia"; a family story recalls her son walking into her room to find her staring into space, surrounded by German newspaper clippings. In that era, Schreck discovered, a local paper reported four extremely violent acts by men against their wives and children, all occurring in the space of a week.

The Constitution, Schreck points out, says it will protect its citizens equally, but legal protections for many women and children, immigrants, people of color, the poor have often been paltry or poorly carried out. (As Jelani Cobb recently wrote, the Second Amendment didn't save Philando Castile.) Schreck traces some effects of the Ninth Amendment on the lives of women in her family and examines the effects of the Fourteenth Amendment more generally, and she reminds us that the Constitution was written by and for

land-owning white men, treating them as fuller citizens than the rest of us — an injustice that has long been plodding toward correction. In the rehearsal space, she asked the people in the room to raise their hands if they were land-owning white men; not surprisingly, no one did. It was hard not to think about the health-care machinations taking place in the Senate and feel that little had changed.

But "What the Constitution Means to Me" is structured to fend off despair. Like the contest itself, it ends with competitive extemporaneous speaking. Schreck's competitor, played by Rosdely Ciprian, is a twelve-year-old champion debater. "She decimates me," Schreck said. Before Ciprian arrived, Butler, who had recently shaved his beard, was nervous about how she would react. "She already busts my ass for everything," he said.

A few minutes later, Ciprian arrived. She was wiry, quick, and energetic, and wore a bright-pink polo shirt neatly buttoned to the top, with matching white-and-pink pants. Butler's face wasn't the first thing she noticed. "Cheez-Its!" she cried, grabbing a box from atop a file cabinet and walking around with her hand in it. When she saw Butler, her jaw dropped. "Why do you look younger?" she said. She stared. "You look more directorly."

Ciprian's energy, to a fortysomething observer, was a keen reminder that the young are not like you and me. That afternoon, while discussing points of order, fruit-from-a-poisonous-tree arguments, and how strange it is that the government "doesn't have a religion but the dollar bill says, 'in god we trust,' " Ciprian also bounced a racquetball, ate Cheez-Its, examined the set model — "Wow!" — put her feet in first position, danced, wiggled, and at one point disappeared behind some drapes, sticking her face out and continuing her conversation. Schreck and Ciprian picked an amendment out of a hat and began to formulate their arguments, sitting side by side at tables and writing on notecards. Then they debated whether the Constitution should be scrapped and replaced or just improved. "It's a fragile document, but it's also still working to form a more perfect union," Ciprian said. "We need to keep our failures to remind us of our mistakes."

Schreck said later, "Watching Rosdely, I remember that being a kid at this age is like your brain is hungry, and you're getting better and better food. And I feel like this" — giving speeches about the Constitution and debating its features — "is delicious food." She said that she wanted to end the play by handing it over to the next generation. She was encouraging Ciprian to suggest endings, and Ciprian, from what Schreck described, was thinking fancifully, and big.

When Schreck was little, she participated in a theatre company that her mother founded called Short Shakespeareans. She loved acting, and later, when she gave these Constitution speeches in American Legion halls, she loved that, too, and realized a different kind of confidence — especially in extemporaneous speaking, which was like improvised essay-writing. "My dad would coach me, and then I'd be like, 'O.K.!,' " she said, clapping her hands with excitement, ready to dig in. It occurred to me that a possible reason that Schreck has been thinking about this experience so much is that it was a time when she was becoming a writer — discovering the thrill of provoking and entertaining people with language. She's doing it again now.

Time Out New York

OF GOVERNMENT ★★★★★ Recommended

Theater Review by Helen Shaw | THURSDAY JUNE 8 2017

From left, Emily Davis, Socorro Santiago and Stacey Yen in Alex Borinsky's "Of Government." Photograph by Elke Young

You know you're in for something extraordinary when even the turn-off-your-phone announcement is wonderful. Before Alex Borinsky's school-pageant-styled Of Government begins, we're plied with cookies and pie—each, we are assured, P.T.A.-made. There's lively preshow accompaniment played by Ms. Marjorie Blain (Beth Griffith), a beaming pianist so lacy and insubstantial she might have been crocheted. Then, channeling the sweetness of your favorite kindergarten music teacher, Ms. Marjorie asks us to participate in a little call-and-response. "Who's got a body?" she sings. "I've got a body!" we respond on cue. "Who's got a cellphone?" We all duck and rustle in our bags.

Such charm and detail is threaded all through Of Government, the second offering in the 2017 edition of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks Festival. If ever a political play were huggable, this would be it. The show begins with an earnestly delivered DIY musical, composed by Joe White, in which everything seems to have been made out of felt and/or very glittery shower shoes. A rebellious mermaid (Melle Powers) tells her father Poseidon (Beth Dixon) that she's leaving the reef, warbling, "Your warnings cannot preempt me!" We're thus introduced to Borinsky's theme of inadequate hegemonic governance while the world's glummest backup mermaid (Keilly McQuail) flails gauze seaweed around. It's delicious.

After the mermaid musical, we move into a series of (largely) realistic scenes, which Borinsky and keen-eyed director Jeremy Bloom push—just slightly—into the absurd. At first, everything's normal. Grown-up Debbie (Stacey Yen) returns to her old one-room schoolhouse in Montana, hoping to find succor from her beloved teacher Barb (Socorro Santiago). Barb, though, has problems too: Her friend Heidi (the transcendently funny Emily Davis) is the local oddball, and another ex-student, Tawny (McQuail again), shows signs of instability.

Borinsky can write like blazes—and he likes to prove it—so amidst the forest of naturalistic dialogue, huge gouts of monologue suddenly rear up. Tawny goes loquaciously mad in one scary scene, which seems necessary to the plot, but how to explain Beth Dixon's aria about a small town losing its grocery store? Who cares! It's a comic masterpiece, and all I can say is it seemed necessary at the time.

But all this hilarity does not disguise the fury at the show's core. ("Who's got rage?" is another of Ms. Marjorie's questions.) A hint at its origins is right in the title. Everything that goes wrong in Of Government can be traced to some systemic failure, some way in which the U.S. fails its people. Barb's school is closing down because of a bureaucratic mix-up; Tawny's meltdown is tied to our grotesque healthcare system. The cuddly school-auditorium vibe of the beginning returns at the end, but this time its point is sharp. If we want to fix the things we've seen, we need to organize on the local level. We need to start baking those pies.