

nautilus

music-theater

Alice Unwrapped

by Laura Harrington and Jenny Giering

Minnesota Fringe Festival August 2009

Previews:

The top twenty:

#12 Nautilus Music-Theater/Alice Unwrapped

by Matthew Everett (7/28/09)

Many's the time I've sung the praises of Nautilus Music-Theater in the past in this blog. Fringe time, there seemed to always be someone who was associated with Nautilus who was worth noting because of that connection. It spoke to the certainty that high quality musical performance would be involved in the production. Well, oddly enough, I checked my past lists and Nautilus itself has never been in the Top 20 before. Time to fix that glaring oversight. And no better year to do it than one in which director and Nautilus guru Ben Krywosz is teaming up again with the wonderful singer-actress Jill Anna Ponasik. They did so before on the Nautilus Fringe show *From The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (2004) and more recently in the Fringe with Jill Anna's solo project *Loss of Breath* (2007). This production, *Alice Unwrapped*, got a first run during the recent Spirit in the House festival, where it was (not surprisingly) well-received by audiences. No reason to expect less here in the Fringe remount. I love listening to Jill Anna sing. And if Ben's in the director's chair, that's just added incentive to go.

Fringe Preview 2009: The Musicals

by Christopher Kidder (7/29/09)

Alice Unwrapped/Nautilus Music-Theater: Two things put this show at the top of my list. First, Nautilus makes good theatre. Period. Second, Jill Anna Ponasik possesses the singing voice I most like to listen to (as opposed to the one that I most like to sing with, which is my own... closely followed by Kermit the Frog's). Anyway... Jill Anna has a rich, expressive voice that you can close your eyes and float on as if it were a cloud. Oh yeah, and one of my favorite people in the world is the music director on this show. Michael Pearce Donley is a great musician whose works I've always admired. I guess that makes three things.

Critics' reviews:

Star Tribune

by Graydon Royce (8/7/09)

Wow. An outbreak of real art at the Fringe. Jill Anna Ponasik sings this slight but affecting opera by Laura Harrington and Jenny Giering, with Michael Pearce Donley at the piano. Ponasik plays a teenager whose father has gone off to the Iraq War and given her one request: Don't fight with your sister. The music, the heartbreak, the sense of honor in young Alice make this 35-minute piece a poignant ode to family relationships. Nautilus Music-Theater has brought this kind of small, beautiful jewel to the Fringe many times. This year is no exception.

Pioneer Press

by Dominic Papatola (8/3/09)

MUST SEE: Alice Bliss is a 15 year-old whose father is MIA in Iraq. Or Afghanistan. Or somewhere. Trying to hold together her family — which includes a mother who has withdrawn and an 8-year-old sister who's preternaturally bright, Alice has donned — and constantly wears — a quasi-military outfit she calls her "existential body armor." In this 35-minute musical, Jill Anna Ponasik gives lovely, rending and plaintively honest voice to Alice as the composing team of Laura Harrington and Jenny Giering create a dissonant but affecting score that sheds light on another of the hidden costs of American military intervention.

Audience reviews:

Deserves SIX kitties (stars)!

by Dan Pinkerton (Rating ★★★★★) This is probably the most moving show I've seen in eight years of Fringing. It's a beautifully written musical about Alice, a 9th-grade girl whose father has been MIA for a year and is probably dead, and who is attempting to hold her family and herself together. Jill Anna performs the material perfectly — it's as if the piece was written for her. She is completely convincing in the three roles of Alice, her 9-year-old sister, and their mother. The show is hugely relevant, is completely heartbreaking, and yet holds out a glimmer of unforced hope at the end. One show like this makes the entire \$150 UltraPass worth it. Go.

Alice Unwrapped

by Joan Calof (Rating ★★★★★) This show is perfection. The writing, the music the voice and the acting ability of Jill Anna, the accompanist, combine into a whole that is more than the sum of its parts. This touching timely and poignant musical was a peak Fringe experience for me.

Don't miss this show

by Marilyn Swanson (Rating ★★★★★) Alice was 15 when her father went to Iraq. I was 60 when my son went to Iraq, and I could sympathize with Alice's emotional roller coaster. Jill Anna Ponasik's embodiment of Alice is powerful, gut-wrenching.

Bring Kleenex to Share

by David Trudeau (Rating ★★★★★) The high quality we expect from Nautilus in Fringe (*Meditations on Arion, John and Jen*, etc.). This musical story of a teen whose Father is absent - on duty in Iraq and MIA. Alice parents her younger sis while Mom breaks down. This is so touching. You will cry - but you will also laugh at the moments on tender humor. A must see. If you or anyone you know ever served in the Armed Forces Alice will make you feel pride and empathy for all the brave families who give up their Moms and Dads and Sons and Daughters to the uncertainties of war time service. The music and the presentation are standing-ovation dynamite.

Touching, poignant — and over too soon

by Brigitta Smith (Rating ★★★★★) This performance truly left me wanting more. Jill Anna Ponasik painted a realistic, touching portrait of a torn family held together by a girl in turmoil. The music will have you enthralled, and although I'd like to have seen a bit more vocal range, it doesn't disappoint.

Tour de Force

by Alan Kagan (Rating ★★★★★) An absolutely perfect blend of music and theater in a dramatic one-person tour-de-force expressing the effects of the current war on an American teenager. Jill Anna Ponasik, as the fifteen year-old Alice, fulfilled the demanding role in every way possible, acting, singing and speaking. The fine stage directing touch of Nautilus director Ben Krywosz is evident. A great libretto text by Laura Harrington, although the song rhyming was not always necessary. Solid music by Jenny Giering.

Moving

by Richard Shields (Rating ★★★★★) I've been to 20 plus shows so far and in terms of moving me to tears this was the one. This show touches your soul with a story that has a reality base to it. Jill carries herself well and her voice fits her material. If you want a show that touches you but leaves you with hope see this one.

Beautiful Wonder

by Tim Voss (Rating ★★★★★) Moving. Pure and simple. This deserves a full house. Do not miss.

Powerful

by Cole Sarar (Rating ★★★★★) A beautiful voice, a powerful story, great characterization, and a strong script. As other reviewers have noted, bring your kleenexes.

Moving Performance — Don't Miss

by Christopher Kemp (Rating ★★★★★) Jill Anna Ponasik did an outstanding job drawing the audience in and holding them close for the entire show. You cannot help but be moved by her performance.

The real thing

by Jim Ahrens (Rating ★★★★★) This show reminds us that the basis of great theatre is deceptively simple: a person with a story to tell. Jill Anna Ponasik gives a marvelous performance of an affecting work that keeps you deeply involved with this fifteen year old. The music, played and sung beautifully, propels the story perfectly. You need to see this... and you'll be very glad you did.

A Must See

by Swizzy Wizzlecheeks (Rating ★★★★★) I don't like musicals, but I heard enough good things about this show to give it a chance. I was not to be disappointed. This show is not political, but rather an affecting tale of trauma on the homefront. Kudos to everyone involved for really grabbing hold of the audience's heartstrings. An absolute must see.

Gripping

by Ben Chadwick (Rating ★★★★★) From the moment the lights go down you are drawn into this gripping story and torn apart as the search for meaning and the grasping for hope force childhood into adulthood. A tour de force performance. Thank you.

Tour de Force

by Janet Fried (Rating ★★★★★) One expects top notch professionalism from the Nautilus Music-Theater and this production does not disappoint. Jill Anna Ponasik does a tour de force one woman show in partnership with pianist Michael Pearce Donley. It is exciting to find this unexpected story for music-theater, an intimate look at an emotional journey of today — military families, fear, isolation, responsibility, being asked to grow up too soon. Jill Anna's Alice is funny, sad, angry, tender. The music worked best for me as underscoring, highlighting Jill Anna's many fine dramatic turns. A must see.

Alice in Wounded-Land

by Fringivitis Vulgaris (Rating ★★★★★) Alice's mom came unraveled when dad didn't come back. Alice flails into adolescence with the grief and anger of someone forced to become the parent to both a parent and a sibling. This is not an easy story to tell, but the performer becomes Alice quite believably. The simple piano music fits the story without distracting the viewer. There were people wiping eyes when the house lights went up.

One woman aria

by Dave Romm (Rating ★★★★★) Alice is the 15-year-old child of a soldier MIA and a mother who's losing it. She's a rebel, wearing combat clothes despite the ostracizing in school and the admonishment of her 8-year-old sister. A one-woman show sung as much as spoken by Jill Anna Ponasik, accompanied on piano by Michael Pierce Donley, the performance is affecting and feels real. When she complains of helmet hair or her sister wails, "I want a normal family", the lot of our fighting forces comes home. Only 35 minutes long, it still deserves four kitties.

Good show

by Derek Miller (Rating ★★★★★) *Alice Unwrapped* grapples with two difficult tropes at once: on one hand, it is about a family dealing with the loss of a loved one — in this case, it is a father deployed to a war-zone and reported missing. On the other hand, it is also about a girl coming to terms with the weird world of adulthood and learning how to navigate within a family. In just about every way, it succeeds. The center of the story is 15-year-old Alice, whose father is missing, whose mother is slowly breaking down, and whose younger sister is pulling away. Alice's response to this is to pull inward and begin constructing a personal body armor, which she describes in incredible detail in the opening song, and which she takes to wearing everywhere she goes. Jill Anna Ponasik gives a wonderful performance as Alice Bliss, in both her singing and acting roles. A one-person musical such as this is a hard trick to pull off. Even for this show's relatively short running time, it's very difficult for an actor to keep an audience invested as the piece shifts in and out of music and multiple characters. Ponasik handles this with ease, neatly navigating the exchanges between Alice and her little sister, while simultaneously keeping the singing relevant and urgent. Director Ben Krywosz has done a smart job in staging and pacing, keeping the action of the piece moving forward all the time, despite the confusion and self-doubt rampant in the character. My only complaint about *Alice Unwrapped* is that the score itself often fails to branch out and explore the depths of Alice's feelings. There is remarkably little shift in tone in the underlying music; it often sounds the same, whether Alice is singing with pride about her home-made body armor or singing with despair over her missing father and slowly-disintegrating household. I would be very interested to find out if there is more orchestration to the piece that simply could not be expressed by the single piano and voice. If you have ever had to deal with a loved one in the military being deployed into hostile territory (and I have), this show will ring true to you in every way. Inside the relatively simple plot are all the worries, frustrations and growing sense of emptiness that comes from the unknown. If you haven't, then it is a true education, one that you should have.

I may have a stunted sense of empathy

by Phillip Andrew Bennett Low (Rating ★★★) An engaging story, but the setting to music didn't contribute much for me. I also found the performer's reliance on exaggerated tics and mannerisms jarring. Full review available at the Twin Cities Daily Planet. (See *blog below*.)

Left Me Wanting Just A Little More

by Sid Solomon (Rating ★★★) A solid showing by Nautilus Music-Theater. It's a moving story, beautifully sung (and accompanied), but with a score that I had a hard time getting behind. I hoped for a bit more melodic variety to help differentiate the content of the various scenes. All in all, however, it's a production well worth seeing.

Bloggers:

Twin Cities Performance Art Examiner

by Brad Richason (8/11/09)

A heartfelt musical monologue voiced by a fifteen year old struggling to cope with a father gone missing in the Middle East and a disintegrating home life, *Alice Unwrapped* digs even deeper emotionally than the initial premise would suggest. Utilizing fully realized characters penned by writer Laura Harrington and accompanying musical score by Jenny Giering, the tumultuous life of Alice Bliss is rendered painfully bare, from being ostracized at school to being harshly judged at home. This world of anxiety and grief is poignantly captured by the powerfully emotive vocals of Jill Anna Ponasik and the richly varied piano accompaniment of Michael Pearce Donley. As Alice searches for even the slightest measure of relief from life's uncertainty and grief, the work evolves into a deeply stirring and ultimately hopeful tribute to anyone that has ever struggled against tragedy.

My thoughts on *Alice Unwrapped*

by Rachel Reiva (8/9/09)

If there is a show that you think that would be impossible for only one person to do, it would be this show. *Alice Unwrapped* in a one woman musical show about a 15-year old girl whose father is a reservist and is called to the Middle East where unfortunately after about a couple of months he is missing in action. Alice lives with her mother and 8 year old sister who she fights with a lot. Her mother is having a constant mental breakdown. She has to take care of her sister and take care of the family that is deteriorating. To top it off she is very socially awkward with the kids at her school because she wears army gear all the time and will not take it off. This show was really creative, and Jill Anna Ponasik was fantastic. She kept my attention throughout and was able to create good distinctions between Alice, the mother, and her sister. To be honest with this being in a musical format, I thought would be hard for anyone to do since they would also have to focus on what they are singing, but the songs were great, they flowed well with what the character was telling. There weren't any awkward moments and it was both very professional and touching through out. I can't even think of any suggestions I could give to Jill Anna Ponasik because she just was able to make it a nearly perfect show. The script and the dialogue was strong in content, and the humor was well placed for such a very heavy subject. This is one of those Fringe shows that are ahead of the curve. This is one show that should definitely be reprised outside the Fringe.

A troubled teen...

by Kate Hoff (8/8/09)

Upstairs for *Alice Unwrapped* presented by Nautilus Music-Theater, performed by Jill Anna Ponasik with piano accompaniment by Michael Pearce Donley. I have to say, I liked this more than I expected to. I'd been hearing rhapsodic reviews. Music theater isn't my bag of cats, but this is a really nicely done, emotional show and Jill Anna is unquestionably extremely talented.

Lenina's History of the Scot

by Scot Moore (8/5/09)

I started the evening with a nearly unknown piece from Nautilus Music-Theater called *Alice Unwrapped*. Jill Ponasik deftly spins a musical yarn about the left-behind military family of an MIA National Guardsman, supported by the flawless piano stylings of Michael Pearce Donley. This was one of those shows that I just threw on my schedule because nothing else I was interested in was playing at 5:30pm. Finally, after three attempts at randomness, it paid off! This was a beautiful show with a talented young performer and a great support system that allowed her to succeed and produce a marvelous piece of artwork. I look forward to more work from both Jill and Nautilus. 4 out of 5 stars.

Alice Unwrapped

by Phillip Andrew Bennett Low (8/4/09)

Urg. Another one that I'm in complete disagreement with the majority on. This is one that I've been hearing a lot about through the grapevine, to the point that at last one person teared up while he was recommending it to me. The show concluded in a nearly unanimous standing ovation. I say nearly unanimous, because I didn't join in on account of apparently having a stunted sense of empathy. I've seen Nautilus Music-Theater on and off for the past several years. They frequently take some very literate texts and set them to music. My impression is generally that these are incredibly technically proficient, but gain very little by being shifted to another medium. This was, essentially, a one-woman show, a story told from the point of view of a teenager whose father is MIA in Iraq, and her attempts to hold her family together. Compelling stuff, and I suspect that I would have been riveted had the material been spoken. I also suspect that much of my hostility comes from a profound dislike for many of the conventions of musical theater: I found her performance excessively mannered, compounded by a series of exaggerated tics and mannerisms that made me want to say *stop stop stop and just tell me what you have to say*. This is less of a reflection on her as an actress — indeed, she found several moments of genuine emotion through the music — than it is on a style of performance that I've always found grating and jarring. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to overcome this sufficiently to reach the character behind it, so I found much of the hour tortuous. (See audience review above.)

Nautilus Music-Theater's *Alice Unwrapped* at The Fringe

by Mariellen Jacobson (8/3/09)

I'm still updating my reviews from this weekend. But if you only see one Fringe Festival show, make it *Alice Unwrapped*. This is a two-person show, with Jill Anna Ponasik singing/acting the role of Alice, an intelligent and sensitive 15-year-old girl who is clinging to the hope that her dear daddy will return from the war (he's MIA) and who is trying to hold the family together (her mom has had a nervous breakdown and her precocious 8-year-old sister is being a precocious 8-year-old). Jill Anna is very convincing and real and heartbreaking and charming in this very timely piece; if you've seen her before, you know that she brings vocal power and

sensitivity as well as strong acting to her roles. Michael Pearce Donley accompanies Jill Anna at the grand piano and serves as Musical Director for this production. It's been a couple years since we've seen his fine work at The Fringe (this being a non-juried and lottery-selected festival, some of the best performers/companies often don't get a slot) so it's great to see him on stage again. And yes, Mike is an old pal from my years with The Refreshment Committee, but I really am not prejudiced - he really is that good (most famously known around here as the co-writer and co-star of *Triple Espresso*). Ben Krywosz (Nautilus Music-Theater's Artistic Director) is the Stage Director for *Alice* — nothing pyrotechnic, no gimmicks, just sensitive and powerful direction — with the slightest hints, we know what's happening and what Alice is feeling all the time. Fringe shows usually receive short or somewhat sustained applause — most of us are eager to rush out of the theater to run to the next show on our list. This performance received an instantaneous and unanimous and long standing ovation.