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Under the Gunn, red carpet meets Fringe

by **Elizabeth Zimmer** / *Metro New York*

“Tim Gunn’s Podcast” may not be the first opera derived from a reality TV show — that honor probably goes to “Jerry Springer — The Opera,” a five-year-old British musical — but it’s certainly the most compact.

Sung by rotund baritone John Schenkel on a curtained platform with composer Jeffrey Lependorf at the piano, the chamber work mashes fashion maven Gunn’s musings with the music of Claude Debussy. The result is perhaps the most authentically post-modern production in the 2008 Fringe Festival and a true delight.

Lependorf had never even seen “Project Runway” when a friend pressed on him a recording of Gunn’s podcast, made after the season three evening gown challenge. Assigned to create a garment for Miss USA to wear in the Miss Universe pageant, the aspiring designers had not only to come up with a wearable dress on a tight budget and a short deadline; they needed to collaborate. Gunn narrates the disastrous pairing of Vincent and Angela and his own failure to defuse the situation.

Tara Conner, one of the shortest beauty queens ever crowned Miss USA, knew what she wanted — a “red carpet” dress — and it was Gunn’s job to shepherd his flock of contestants as they tried to meet the demands of their young client. Lependorf’s hourlong piece captures Gunn’s emotional turmoil as he tries to be parent, teacher, diva, taskmaster and taste arbiter all at once.

Schenkel doesn’t resemble Gunn, but so accurately does the libretto capture his speech patterns that the host seems to be in the room.

You don’t have to be a fan of “Runway” to appreciate Lependorf’s work here or even an opera buff, though aficionados will probably have the most fun.

Composer and singer elevate Gunn’s unscripted musings to the level of serious musical accomplishment.