



2008 New York International Fringe Festival Reviews

Tim Gunn's Podcast (a reality chamber opera)

Reviewed by Nancy Kim

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Coincidentally, before attending the performance of Tim Gunn's Podcast (a reality chamber opera), I spent a good hour earlier in the day reading through several online message boards and blogs commenting on the latest episode of Bravo's marquee cable reality show, Project Runway, now in its fifth season. I join the legion of fans for the popular television competition seeking the best fashion designer among a crop of contestants. The unwavering consensus among fans and casual observers is a universal adoration for the show's host and mentor, Tim Gunn. As the former chair of fashion design at the famed Parsons The New School for Design, he lends his expertise and wisdom throughout the competition, but the absolutely unplanned gift to the reality show has been Tim's personality: part helpful critic, part sophisticated uncle, part TV naïf who unexpectedly contributed the show's catchphrases—"Make it work" and "Carry on"—to the pop culture lexicon.

As any respectable Project Runway fan will tell you, Tim Gunn's podcasts found on the Bravo website following each episode are special treats to hear the backstage events and Tim's unedited and detailed opinions as well as the nuances of his personality. If you are beginning to think that no person should spend this extraordinary amount of time thinking, discussing, and deconstructing a television host, then you may not find much appeal in attending Jeffrey Lependorf's creation at FringeNYC: an original chamber opera composed and performed using the full transcript of one of Tim Gunn's podcast.

Or, you may recognize that Lependorf has come up with the most brilliant use of reappropriation of a pop culture/low culture television program already appropriating the high culture of fashion design; in addition to the other level of taking a new technological format like the podcast and transferring that content into a old-fashioned opera libretto for one person to sing with piano accompaniment.

Lependorf chooses wisely with a podcast commenting on a memorable episode of Season 3. In this episode, Tim Gunn describes the challenge of creating a red carpet evening gown for Tara Connor, then Miss USA. Seven of the competitors are chosen to create designs based on their pitches to O'Connor while the remaining seven competitors are paired up with the designers to help them construct and execute the designs within the limited time. Tim describes the work and the chemistry between the paired teams, but provides the unintentionally hilarious details of his dislike for Vincent, one of the more bad-to-work-with/good-for-TV personalities on the show. Uncharacteristically for him, Tim admits that he must be pulled aside by show's producer because of his dislike for a contestant, and he shares all the details of the showdown in his podcast.

All this and more, including the "uh-s" and "um's" are sung by professional opera singer John Schenkel. With his warm baritone voice, he also captures some of the classic Tim Gunn facial expressions and tableaux as well as shows the athletic effort to maintain the vocal power and true focus to really tell us the story to the end (the performance clocks in at about one hour). Director Linda Lehr aids in shaping the journey and makes a good choice to perform this straight with not much winking to the audience, while Lependorf has created a wonderful range in the score and knows how to punch up the humor. But let's give Tim Gunn his due: only he could pull off saying both "tête-à-tête" and "bitch-slap" to describe a fashion situation.

Will people outside the Project Runway fanworld be interested? I don't know how to answer that, but I appreciated this truly creative, funny, risk-taking, and quirky experiment.

Written/created by: Jeffrey Lependorf, based on Tim Gunn's actual podcast
Directed by Linda Lehr