

# OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

## **Tim Gunn's Podcast (A Reality Chamber Opera)**

Part of the New York International Fringe Festival - FringeNYC

Theatre Review by Matthew Murray

Think reality TV is boring? Think opera is boring? Think fashion is boring? Think Internet audio is boring? Then you need to race to the Jazz Gallery to see - and hear - what happens when all four fuse: They create an ecstatic comic tour de force going by the title of Tim Gunn's Podcast.

The subtitle of Jeffrey Lependorf's sublimely absurd outing both says it all and says nothing: "A reality chamber opera." True, the hour-long show is sung through with unapologetically legit music; it takes as its subject the Bravo TV series Project Runway; and the title and sole character (whom baritone John Schenkel thrillingly evokes) is that show's couture overlord. But who could imagine such dreary components would elicit pure magic?

All Schenkel does is recite recit cribbed directly from Gunn's podcast following the third episode of Project Runway's third season, in which contestants had two days and \$300 to construct a gown worthy of Miss USA. The participants' angst is palpable, their talent and judgment questionable, and you might think that when grouped with Gunn's stutters, banal observations, and lack of unifying throughline that only stultifying, static theatre could result.

But Lependorf unearths buffo resonance in even the most staid, clichéd comments that Gunn proclaims as if Gospel truths. Reality TV, which takes itself most seriously when it's least warranted, can't withstand the withering attention paid it by the heavy-duty melodies it's been paired with: Gunn's recollections of the petty bickering and even pettier design philosophies become marvelously mocking when set to notes more appropriate for warring armies and disintegrating hearts.

The staging, by Linda Lehr, is by necessity simple - the tiny stage allows for only performer, piano, a chair, and barely movement between them. But the dramatic motion, around expectedly inert topics, makes the show at its best expansively hysterical: Just the way Schenkel basso-bellows the word "immunity," as if blasting through a key characterological turn in Don Giovanni, could rank as the most blistering comedy anywhere in this year's Fringe Festival.

Schenkel is terrific throughout, though, as a gleeful guide through Gunn's self-important world. He and Lependorf completely transform the podcast's diatribe into a cutting comment on the increasing shallowness of American entertainment media, reminding you there's so much more out there to be savored. But if Project Runway will always be much looser than a night at the Met, Tim Gunn's Podcast is a flawless fit.