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## Seven Shows to See at 2014 Hollywood Fringe Festival

by [L.A. Weekly Theater Critics](#)

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- PHOTO BY KATE HAGERTY  
Robert Homer Mollohan  
in *The Conduct of Life*

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This year, *L.A. Weekly* has partnered with theater website Stage Raw to review shows at the Hollywood Fringe Festival, running through June 29. Here are some of our favorites. For tickets, go to [hollywoodfringe.org](http://hollywoodfringe.org).

***The Conduct of Life:*** In an unidentified country, ambitious military officer Orlando (Robert Homer Mollohan) wants to "achieve maximum power." His sensitive wife, Leticia (Karina Wolfe), wants to "be a woman who speaks in a group and have everybody listen." But she won't stand up to him, even once she becomes aware of Nena (Emily Yetter), the young girl Orlando keeps and rapes in the basement.

Orlando's colleague Alejo (Jeremy Mascia) impotently wonders if "anybody can change anything." He, too, fails to speak up against the torture he and Orlando perpetrate against the government's enemies.

Maria Irene Fornés' Obie-winning 1985 play about cruelty and power remains as resonant today as when it was written. Despite the tiny space and less-than-ideal use of work lights, director Sabina Ptasznik stages the piece with a ferocity and nuance that communicate both the horror of violence and our tacit acceptance of it. Mollohan radiates Orlando's rage (if not his pain), Wolfe skillfully balances Leticia's cool exterior and her petrifying insecurity, and Yetter's portrayal of Nena's innocence is heartbreaking. —Mayank Keshaviah

***Death by Powerpoint:*** There are no actual deaths in this sly satire by playwright-director James F. Robinson, but one character experiences near-death.

Four motivational speakers are finalists in the National Global Influencers contest. Lucy (Scarlett Bermingham) begins by telling us they're here to destroy our most cherished beliefs. She tells us that the secret of success is to ignore depressing facts and to practice self-delusion: Just tell yourself, "You are freakin' awesome." Mark (Eric Pierce) assures us that the way to achieve the Inevitability of Cosmic Bliss is to concentrate on the pushed-in face of an endearing pug-dog. Joan (Emily Thomas) is so distracted by her chocolate addiction that she loses track of her message, crying out, "My free will was roofied and raped by a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup."

Matthew (Michael Riffle) insists that we are less concerned with the crimes of Stalin and Hitler than with getting laid, and direct action is futile, since all real change occurs sideways. He then performs a bit of grandstanding, to impress the contest judges, which nearly does him in.

The script is scatter-shot but funny, and the actors sharp and stylish. —Neal Weaver

***The Fantasticks:*** Those who have fond memories of this 1959 musical likely will find much to enjoy in Good People Theater Company's production. Audiences coming to it fresh (like me) might miss the rush of nostalgia but should still be pleasantly entertained.

*The Fantasticks* is a remake of Edmond Rostand's *Les Romanesques*, about next-door neighbors Matt (Matt Franta) and Luisa (Audrey Curd), whose fathers conspire to get them to fall in love, and how the world conspires to pull them apart.

Curd captures Luisa's sense of romantic mania perfectly, and she delivers a charming version of the song "Much More." Franta is a bit bland as Matt, but he and Curd offer a nice duet in "Soon It's Gonna Rain." Matt Stevens and Michael P. Wallot are amusing in their comedic roles, and Joey D'Auria is very funny as forgetful old actor Henry. Christopher Karbo, unfortunately, doesn't quite bring the necessary brio to the narrator El Gallo, although his singing voice is strong.

Director Janet Miller does a lot with a little. Her staging adds a lively energy to numbers such as "Never Say No." The decision to bring in harpist Jillian Risigari-Gai reaps musical dividends, adding to the story's magical feeling. —Terry Morgan

***Independence:*** This is a striking revival of Lee Blessing's 1984 drama about a family caught in the

swirls of crisis and change in a small Iowa town. At the heart of the play is Evelyn Briggs (Shelley Phillips), the mother of three daughters, who is emotionally unstable, manipulative and grasping.

The fuse is lit when the eldest, Kess (Kat Muldoon), a lesbian and college professor, returns home after four years to find her youngest sister, Jo (Jenny Simpson), pregnant and wearing a neck brace due to an attack by her mother. Middle sister Sherry (Lauren Bengel), a wild child and loose-panty who is into "meaningless relationships," and is an aspiring sculptor, is never short of hurtful words or droll mockery. Evelyn is a master at tossing the apple of discord among her children, engaging in her destructive ritual of attraction and repulsion.

The play is pegged as a coming-of-age story, but it's really about breaking free of bonds, even at the expense of those we love. The performances are outstanding under Vernée Watson's exacting direction. —Lovell Estell III

***Million Dollar Hair:*** So who is Bernie Schonfeld? Apart from being a music mogul, philanthropist, homeopath and serial philanderer (eight marriages!), he is the fictional character being honored in this outrageously funny "tribute," by the folks at Lost Moon Radio. Narrating Bernie's inspiring life story is his talentless daughter, January (Leslie Korein), whose droll commentary and endless malapropisms ("We have a suppository of talent") are almost as funny as some of the facts she reveals about dear, departed daddy. Like his death from a bad hairdo (not the one he spent \$12,000 on); his numerous amorous conquests; and, sadly, his ouster as CEO of Million Dollar Records by the same brats he trained to be industry cutthroats.

No gala tribute would be complete without music, here provided by Dylan Ris and his superb four-piece band. The songsters are all worthy of the moment: Ryan Harrison sings a lively ditty about living with lockjaw; Lauren Flans rocks with a rap number about teen pregnancy; and nothing is quite as funny as Bartok's Caravan (Flans, Harrison and Dan Oster), who look — and sing — as if they were resurrected from some ancient Moravian castle. Director Lauren Ludwig could pace this a bit better; notwithstanding, it's a ton of laughs. —Lovell Estell III

***Odessa:*** In this world premiere written by John Tyler McClain and directed by Carly D. Weckstein, Earth "Up Top" is a postapocalyptic wasteland, the casualty of an unspecified disaster that has left bottles of "Clean" scarce. Below ground, Alice (the marvelous Joanna Bateman), wearing a tattered blue dress, tends her plants and practices the waltz, awaiting the return of Cliff (Bruce A. Lemon Jr.), with whom she barter sexual favors in exchange for Clean. Their tenuous existence is upended by the capture of Preacher (Bethany Esfandiari), who turns Alice's head with tales of Odessa, a survivors' enclave, sparking a power struggle with Cliff.

Alana Chevront's costumes add a gritty realism with just the right touch of whimsy, while the lighting — work lights on wheels, operated by the actors and able to swing around as required — create the illusion of intimacy interrupted by glaring harshness.

Bateman's performance dances on a line between delicacy of feeling and barminess, strengthening the allusions to *Alice in Wonderland* (originally titled *Alice's Adventures Under Ground*). Bateman isn't matched by her costars, however; Esfandiari seems as though she hasn't quite committed to the unscrupulous rambler's brutish philosophy. But despite threatening to be unremittingly dark,

under Weckstein's direction the script evokes surprising humor and even a glimmer of redemption.  
—Jenny Lower

***The Wake:*** In Ben Moroski's mesmerizing solo show, it's not so much the story he spins as the manner in which he spins it that grips your attention.

Directed by Nick Massouh, Moroski's mercurial narrator, Peter, is a novice actor whose workshop performance, under the tutelage of a therapeutic instructor, recounts an ego-shattering breakup with a woman he adored and depended on. Peter's pretense of a "scripted" delivery is soon discarded, however, as he begins to tell us about his background: He's a kid from a small town who arrived in the big city looking for where life really happens, only to find that beneath the glitter it's all pretty much the same.

Alternately funny and painful, his narrative takes a Stygian turn when he spots a beautiful woman on a disco dance floor; later he finds her prostrate beside his car and takes her home, falling just as desperately in love with this cryptic creature as he was with the love object who preceded her — but with a twist.

Notwithstanding its clever central conceit, Moroski's themes — unrequited love and the search for a world stage bigger and better than the one we're born to — are common enough. What's uncommon is the raw and riveting texture of his performance: the exacting physicality he uses to express hurt, disappointment, desolation and love. It's rare to see such vulnerability portrayed by a male artist in so unguarded and accomplished a way. It's a coup. —Deborah Klugman

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