



VULTURE

THEATER REVIEW JAN. 14, 2021

It's Weird-Theater-Festival Season, in a Year When Everything's Avant-Garde Anyway

By Helen Shaw

In a normal year, New York's January performance festivals look to the future. After the sugary glut of the holidays, audiences get curious about the experimental vanguard — so they head to Under the Radar, or the music-theater-based PROTOTYPE, or the Brooklyn-centric Exponential Festival. Usually, this would be a chance to see over the horizon to where the form is headed, both locally and internationally. This year, though, the January festivals barely make a break with what we've been watching for months. *All* performance feels experimental now. Once theater or dance has been melted into the borderless online Uncanny Valley, it's automatically hybridized, globalized, mediatized. Even the glitz of Broadway has turned into virtual self-produced cabarets, post-dramatic TikTok collabs, and Dadaist Zoom mosaics. All aesthetics — conventional and avant-garde — have sloshed together.

Even so, this is my favorite time of the year. I spent my first January festival weekend mainly watching Under the Radar shows, and, with a key exception, the pleasures were steady if modest.

There's a bit more heft to Teatro Anónimo's *Espíritu*, a Chilean short film written and directed by Trinidad González. Like *Capsule*, it uses casual handheld camerawork to keep the audience unbalanced, but of the two, *Espíritu* offers a witchier brew. In a darkened theater, a trio invokes modern demons, hoping to trap them. They each squeeze a drop of blood in a bottle, and their language grows strange and possessed, but ensuing scenes of interpersonal and social violence imply that they botched the spell.

To see the less-accessible version of this genre — Stoned Soap Opera That Hints at Demonic Powers — go to the Exponential Festival's YouTube channel for *Look Out Shithead*. Object Collection's Travis Just has written scenes that almost, but don't ever, make sense. "To learn, it's very ... it's your ... say you learned!" says a man at a lunch, to a date who wears protective goggles while she applies makeup. In an earlier scene, Italians at a book store talk about love ("How is the color of hope?" "Green!"); later, a man bicycles his legs on his floor. Richard Foreman fans will recognize some of the actors, as well as the crunchy texture of the word salad. It isn't tasty, exactly, but the abstractions do clear your mental pathways — roughage for the synapses.