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By FRANK SCHECK

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August 14, 2006 -- THE Fringe Festival was made for shows like "The Fartiste," an outrageous new musical that practically begs for bad jokes and puns while reviewing it. But surprise, surprise, this show depicting the true-life story of Joseph Pujol, a celebrated performer at Paris' Moulin Rouge whose act consisted of, well, blowing gas out of his behind, is both entertaining and even strangely touching.

Pujol apparently had an abnormally elastic sphincter that enabled him to dispel odorless gas at will in a wide variety of auditory forms. For several years during the 1890s, he was the Moulin Rouge's most celebrated performer but, according to this show, his career was ultimately undone by his high-flown artistic aspirations. Or, as he puts it while defending his intention to present an ambitious musical opus, "Nobody owns the wind."

Somehow, the show's creators manage to tell this highly outlandish story in a manner that dignifies its subject while still being highly amusing. Using Pujol's quest for musical respectability as a means to explore the need for artistic expression even under the most unlikely of circumstances, the creators leaven the vulgarity of the proceedings with actual depth.

Of course, that isn't to say that there aren't many cheap laughs to be had. The show tells his story with no small degree of, um, explosive humor. Fortunately for audience members, Pujol's unique skills are only mimed by lead actor Kevin Kraft

(using an admirable range of body language), with actor Steven Scott, perhaps the true star of the production, providing an amazing array of vocal effects into a microphone.

Charles Schulman's book and Michael Roberts' score are both highly accomplished, and the show features an atypically first-rate cast for a Fringe

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production, including Tony nominee Mark Baker as Toulouse Lautrec and Broadway veteran Nick Wyman as a sleazy emcee.

Also notable is the choreography of Richard Move, who sexes up such traditional dance forms as the cancan to highly lascivious effect.

ANOTHER obsession of the Fringe Festival is celebrity pop culture, and at first glance "I Was Tom Cruise" would seem to be yet another dissection of a semi-ridiculous public figure. But Alexander Poe's play has more serious matters on its mind than that.

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The tale of a yuppie couple whose lives are altered by the Scientist/movie star when he films a movie in their apartment building, the play does indeed provide comic riffs on its subject, but is also a serious portrait of existential malaise.

Frank (Gideon Banner) and Paula (Victoria Haynes) are experiencing a definite lull in their marriage. And things are not helped by the sudden arrival of Cruise (Jeff Berg), who takes the couple under his wing after a chance encounter. Soon, Paula is crying out "Oh, Tom!" when the couple start to make love, and Frank begins to wonder whether he will lose his wife to the charismatic superstar.

Although the play examines the way celebrities impact our lives - Frank's best buddy (Cormac Bluestone) becomes excited just because "the guy from 'Wings' " has joined their gym - it takes a more fantastical turn when Cruise, taking notice of his new friend's depressed state, makes him a startling offer. Soon, Frank, hanging out with the likes of Joaquin Phoenix and Oliver Platt, discovers that the actor, not to mention the Church of Scientology, are not at all what they seem to be.

The surprisingly emotionally resonant play contains plenty of sharp, witty observations. Although this Fringe production would benefit from much faster pacing, it is very well-acted, with Berg particularly terrific as Cruise. Bearing an uncanny resemblance to the actor, he captures his intensity and mannerisms without once resorting to cheap caricature.

THE FARTISTE *New York International Fringe Festival. Harry de Jur Playhouse, 466 Grand St. (212) 420-8877. Through Aug. 20.*

I WAS TOM CRUISE *New York International Fringe Festival. Connelly Theatre, 220 E. Fourth St. (212) 279-44988. Through Aug. 22.*

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