

OFF BROADWAY

Not Your Grandma's Theatre

The Fartiste

Theatre Review by [Matthew Murray](#)

A performer who earns his living through specialty farting. If that strikes you as a good idea for a musical, you'll probably find *The Fartiste* worth the trek to the Lower East Side's Harry de Jur playhouse. But please be forewarned: You'll have to really, really love this concept to survive 90+ minutes of this Fringe Festival show by Charles Schulman (original story and book) and Michael Roberts (music and lyrics), who coast so much in writing it that they give the Eastern Seaboard a real run for its money.

Their show is based on the true story of French professional gas-passer Joseph Pujol, whose unique gifts earned him a regular berth at the Belle Époque Moulin Rouge. Given the show's general leanings, it might as well have been named *Sunday with the Farts and Joe*: It paints Pujol (Kevin Kraft) as a terminally misunderstood, frustrated artist who wants great things (he dreams of an entirely farted symphony), but cruelly isn't allowed to escape his popular niche.

Despite being stuffed with all the usual stock characters - a supporting but dubious wife (Rebecca Kupka), the saucy temptress who wants the star for herself (Lyn Philistine), the sleazy act booker (Jim Corti) determined to keep Pujol in his place, the Moulin Rouge host (Nick Wyman) only a step away from *Cabaret's* emcee - one simple fact remains: This show exists solely to explore how far it can push its absurd premise.

It's easy to imagine Schulman and Roberts chortling while writing their various ballads and inspirational about wind-breaking, thinking they'd pass off the entire show as some grand theatrical statement about art's inversely proportionate relationship to fame, when it's really just about farting. But lyrics like "My dream man was born of tradition / With a good job and staid disposition / But the man that I love / Works in a crouching position" make it impossible to take their story seriously. So, for that matter, does Mark Baker's scampering around on his knees all evening in a bizarre, borderline-offensive imitation of Toulouse-Lautrec that

doesn't rank as one of director John Gould Rubin's better ideas.

As this is a show built on bad ideas, it's unsurprisingly stuffed with such excess: Nearly every non-Pujol song could be cut (including everything for the magnetic but robotic Wyman), and the performances are more dutifully ghoulish than dramatically integrated. Nearly everyone is as strictly professional as they are forgettable, singing and dancing (the cluttered choreography is by Richard Move) prettily in service of nothing of consequence. At least the six-piece orchestra (under the baton of the excellent orchestrator, John Baxindine) masterfully communicates the broken-down beauty the Moulin Rouge celebrated; if this show lacks many things, flavor isn't among them.

Nor is good sound: Pujol's artistic expressions are all given form by vocal effects maestro Steven Scott, the evening's true find. There aren't any flatulence-inspired sounds he can't create with his mouth and hands, and he's required to vocalize barnyard animals, orchestral instruments, and practically everything in between. (Actors, take note: This is the purpose of the "special skills" section on your resume.) So it's perhaps ironic, given Pujol's treatment, that Scott is relegated to a microphone stage left and not allowed to bask in the center-stage spotlight he deserves. (He certainly trumps Kraft in the personality department; is there no way he could play the role alone?)

Unfortunately, Scott is never given the opportunity to recreate the real Pujol's tour-de-force interpretation of the 1906 San Francisco earthquake, which would undoubtedly have been a stunning showstopper. But since we've almost certainly not heard the last of *The Fartiste* (if *Urinetown* can hit the big time, so can this), there's still time for Schulman and Roberts to work it in.

The Fartiste

Through August 20

Running Time: 90 minutes

Harry DuJur Playhouse, 466 Grand Street

Tickets online and Festival Performance Schedule:

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