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Festivals to Enliven the Dead of Winter

By LARRY ROHTER



ONCE upon a time, the first half of January was considered a slow, even dead, stretch for the performing arts in New York. Not anymore.

A bountiful array of theater, music and dance festivals has grown up in recent years around the annual conference of the Association of Performing Arts Presenters, enabling New Yorkers to see some of the same performances that the association's 2,000 members, many of whom are in charge of bookings for arts institutions around the country, will be attending.

"If you throw a rock, you're going to find someone doing a show," said Vallejo Gantner, the artistic director of Performance Space 122, the sponsor of one of the festivals. "There's a kind of critical mass that makes these days feel exciting. And for both established artists and emerging companies, it is an opportunity to put themselves in front of a global industry, not just local audiences and reviewers, and find opportunities to extend the life of their work."

Many of the productions on display during (and even after) the conference, which starts on Friday and continues into next week, aim to be experimental and cutting-edge and thus are unlikely to make their way to Broadway or a basketball arena. But for

adventurous audiences, part of the pleasure is the chance to watch a work or career unfold.

"The Brother/Sister Plays," part of which was performed at the Under the Radar Festival three years ago, brought the playwright Tarell Alvin McCraney to attention and went on to have a critically acclaimed run at the Public Theater that ended last month.

Each of the main festivals has a somewhat different focus and format. Under the Radar, affiliated with the Public Theater and now in its sixth year, is the biggest, with 20 productions over 12 days at nine locations.

The New York Times

Culturemart, produced by the Here Arts Center since 1996, presents sneak-peek showcases of projects in progress, rather than finished works, while Performance Space 122's five-year-old Coil festival has demonstrated a slightly more international bent.

On Sunday Culturemart even offers a free Hybrid Performance Brunch, aimed mainly at presenters but also open to the public. Reservations are required, but snippets of four works, ranging from a song cycle about insect life to a multimedia presentation based on a 13th-century Chinese story, will be performed.

"For us, it's really important to present works that are varied in terms of disciplines, subject matter and cultural perspective," said Kristin Marting, the Here Arts Center's artistic director. "Some of the works will be very theatrical, and others integrate music and text. But everything we show at Here has at least two things going on."

Trends come and go, of course, and this year there seem to be an unusual number of productions involving puppetry. Under the Radar, for example, is offering "The Devil You Know," Ping Chong's reworking of "The Devil and Daniel Webster," itself an adaptation of the Faust tale, while Culturemart includes separate puppet productions inspired by the plays of Federico García Lorca and Bellini's opera "La Sonnambula," the Bellini with dance elements as well.

When asked to explain the surge, Mark Russell, the artistic director and producer of Under the Radar, laughed and ventured a made-to-order explanation.

"This is puppetry for adults," he said. "It's not about clowns and mime, it's very sophisticated work. But what's nice is that when you see a puppet, it brings out the little kid in you, and sometimes you open your heart to experience things you wouldn't otherwise. There is both a certain distancing and intimacy that comes across."

Of all the puppet plays, the early buzz seems strongest for "Jerk," a joint presentation of Under the Radar and Coil that the writer Dennis Cooper has developed with European collaborators. Based on Mr. Cooper's dark novella of the same title, about the real-life serial killer Dean Corll, who recruited two teenagers to help him murder more than a score of boys in Texas in the 1970s, it was described by Mr. Russell as "one of the scariest pieces I've ever produced, and I've produced a lot of wild things."

This year there has also been a lot of advance talk about a pair of Under the Radar theatrical works influenced by movie directors: "Gin & 'It'," a co-production with Coil, tries to translate the mood of Hitchcock's "Rope" into live drama, while in "John Cassavetes' 'Husbands,'" a single cast performs live and on video, acting and improvising a script based on that 1970 Cassavetes film.

Another anticipated co-production of Under the Radar and Coil is "Chautauqua!," which uses 21st-century technology and style to update the 19th-century lecture programs from which it derives its title. These all reflect an artistic tendency, on display in past years but even more evident this year, to mix and match mediums.

"We're all looking at what live theater means," said Mr. Gantner, of Performance Space 122. "There is a real spread of work that crosses boundaries and is hard to classify."

The New York Times

For fans of music that eschews the conventions of pop, offerings are also abundant. Winter Jazzfest, on Friday and Saturday, focuses on young jazz performers who have absorbed a variety of influences from around the world (see article, Page C1).

On Sunday it's the turn of Globalfest, an annual world-music event that this year features a dozen acts from five continents on three stages at Webster Hall. Now in its seventh year, Globalfest prides itself on a program that ranges from the familiar to the exotic. La Excelencia, a driving 12-piece orchestra with roots in the Bronx that specializes in "salsa with a conscience," is an example of the familiar.

As for exotica, how about Namgar? This rock ensemble from the Siberian steppe, which combines traditional and modern instruments, is named for its colorfully dressed lead singer, who seems almost a Mongolian version of Bjork. Or perhaps you'd prefer Nightlosers, a blues band from Transylvania that also draws on Romanian Gypsy and folk music.

"We want to help people get beyond their own taste and expertise and make them realize there's this amazing influx of artists coming through town at the quietest time of the year, when everyone should be hibernating," said Bill Bragin, a director of the festival. "We were founded post-9/11, when there was a sense of xenophobia and borders closing, so we thought it was important to put international work out there."

Two other world-music festivals, not formally affiliated with the arts presenters' conference but trying to piggyback on the energy it generates, will also be taking place this weekend. Here Comes Trouble, at 92Y TriBeCa on Friday, focuses on unlikely Latin-based hybrids, like mariachi-bluegrass, ranchera-reggae and psychedelic surf cumbia. The third-annual Mondo Mundo, on Saturday night at the Hiro Ballroom, offers similarly improbable permutations on music from places like Burkina Faso and Lebanon.

On the dance front there is activity too, beyond hybrid works elsewhere. Dance Theater Workshop is reviving two critically praised experimental productions that it presented last year, Tere O'Connor's "Wrought Iron Fog," on Friday, and Pam Tanowitz's "Be in the Gray With Me," on Sunday and Monday. There is also an advance look on Friday at a third piece scheduled to premiere on March 31, "There is so much mad in me," a meditation on the nature of human connection by Faye Driscoll, whose recent works have drawn strongly favorable reviews.

"Part of our mission here is to support artists investigating contemporary dance in provocative and substantial ways," said Carla Peterson, the group's artistic director. "There is a critical mass of activity going on, and it is our responsibility to show that work."

***Photography by Scott Irvine depicts, "The Devil You Know," a puppetry reworking of "The Devil and Daniel Webster," is among works at winter festivals in the next week