here”) and glibly assured us that the show would not be too long. She then explained her process, highlighting the workshop quality of the performance we were about to see. She goes to a city, usually by invitation from a producing organization, and follows whatever advice she gets (from friends and strangers) about things to do, gathering what she unabashedly calls “random material.” Still, the material chosen made clear that she gravitated toward the unusual. Making quick work of dive bars, ballroom dancing lessons, a Quaker meeting (“an awkward party”), and even the macabre Mutter Museum (a collection of medical oddities housed in the College of Physicians), Weedman discussed in detail how she went on two Tinder dates. The men—a guy who had been to 220 Bruce Springsteen concerts and took her to the Rocky steps at 2:00 in the morning (cue music), and a coffee-shop manager who taught the Alexander technique in prisons and was working on a one-man show—provided fodder for more self-revelatory comedy. She turned quickly to a description of her ex-husband’s affair with the couple’s nanny, which eventually led to their divorce, including a broad performance of the much younger woman swooning when he showed her his driver’s license and health insurance card! Still, the fact that she sought out Tinder dates suggests that she was drawn to the extreme in gathering these experiences. These (and most other) segments about her interactions with the people she encountered reminded us (as does the title) that the show was not about a city, but about Weedman in that city.

The piece felt like a careening rant, best represented by the scattered index cards on the floor at the end (many of them discarded without being included), with Weedman abruptly announcing “I’ll end there.” Without seeming disingenuous, she fully joined us in the uncertainty of the piece’s outcome, in keeping with the sense throughout that she did not entirely know where she was going. At the conclusion of Gray’s Anatomy, the performer would bring out a poster board with his address on it, asking members of the audience to contact him if they had any stories of alternative healing methods he might incorporate into the show. While this marked a departure for Gray (both coming forward and asking for help), Weedman has embraced the notion of crowd- (or city-)sourcing material for autobiographical work. Linking her use of persona to her early work on The Daily Show positions the city shows as a clear part of an ongoing commitment to autobiography, as does her willingness to carve out time from a busy film/television schedule. The workshop quality of the pieces further suggests the importance to her of the uncertainty and danger of live performance. For, like Gray before her, Weedman creates pieces whose very subject matter is the way in which they are made, and the making of the artist herself.

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Since the early 2000s, husband and wife team Brendan Milburn and Valerie Vigoda (two-thirds of the “power-pop trio” Groove Lily) have ventured into the world of composing for the stage. To date, their most well-known theatrical works are two “rewired” versions of classic fairy tales, Striking 12 (an urban riff on “The Little Match Girl”) and Sleeping Beauty Wakes (set in a modern-day sleep-disorder clinic), both collaborations with playwright Rachel
Sheinkin. Milburn and Vigoa’s most recent theatrical foray, the two-person, time-traveling, cyber-love story *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me*, received its electric world premiere in the Seattle Repertory Theatre’s intimate Leo K. Theatre, presented by Balagan Theatre. Coauthored with *Memphis* scribe Joe DiPietro and directed by Lisa Peterson (*Ant Iliad*), *Shackleton* is an ambitious work whose strengths lie as much in the technical expertise that is required to pull it off as in its whimsical book and score.

Vigoda originally conceived the piece in 2009 as a solo performance piece after experimenting with music-looping technology to create and manipulate layers of sound mixes in real time. Here, Vigoda’s blue-and-violet, coifed single mother Kat was joined onstage by the charismatic, protean Wade McCollum in a number of roles, including Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, deadbeat boyfriend Bruce, and even Ponce de León and Jacques Cousteau.

After being summarily dismissed from a job as a composer for video-game scores, Kat blogs from scenic designer Alexander Nichols’s Frankensteinian makeshift music studio, which engulfs her freezing Brooklyn apartment. Computers, cords, and cameras fed into microphones, instruments, and a single iconic reel-to-reel tape recorder, each of which served a practical purpose in scoring the musical live. Suddenly, she begins receiving transdimensional answering-machine messages and Skype calls from the long-dead explorer, who professes his love for her and her music. He adopts Kat’s sci-fi theme for “Star Blazers” as the anthem for his miraculous 1914 expedition aboard the doomed ship *Endurance*. Kat soon joins him in the Antarctic waste as his muse, accompanying him as he overcomes impossible odds to rescue his crew, without a single loss of life.

Yet, *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me* is far more than a nautical history lesson wrapped in a paranormal love story by way of Tony Kushner (although Shackleton’s uncanny arrival via refrigerator certainly does evoke *Angels*’ Mr. Lies). The musical offers poignant commentary on the alienating effects of twenty-first-century social media, the need to leave one’s comfort zone and venture into the dangerous world outside (a theme present in *Striking 12* and *Sleeping Beauty Wakes* as well), and the value of epic odysseys of self-discovery in an era where the very idea of exploration seems passé.

The sheer musicality of the score was enhanced by the manner in which it was performed onstage. GrooveLily fans are well-acquainted with Vigoda’s virtuosic talents as she simultaneously acts, sings, and plays her Viper electric violin, strapped to her shoulder and neck as if it were a natural appendage. Yet, as Kat, she exhibited a new level of musical dexterity as she built layers of musical loops of sampled sounds into a self-accompanying orchestra of one. There was an innate sadness and dread that permeated Vigoda’s performance, as this technique fragmented her identity, reconstituting it over and over again. Screens projected multiple Warholian images of her face as she desperately sent blog posts into cyberspace like so many letters in bottles on the open sea. The song “Stop Rewind Play Record” pulled this into narrow focus as she recounted her early experiments with acoustic looping on a reel-to-reel tape recorder as an attempt to connect with her absent father—an intense metaphor for life in which she dreams of the ability to edit and splice out the negative elements and replay/relive them in a reconstituted reality.

When the trilling, tenor-voiced McCollum gallantly appeared as Ernest, with both sextant and banjo in hand, the two immersed themselves in a wild series of sea shanties and hootenannies. As they ventured further into the past and the Antarctic wilderness, however, one could sense Kat’s unease as she was unshackled (no pun intended) from her samplers and circuits and strayed into the more acoustic, vivid world of Ernest’s banjo and her violin. In the midst of all of the raucous bombast, Kat is pulled hurtling back into the present when her infant son Zach begins crying offstage and she cannot bring herself to attend to his needs, immobilized by her own insecurity and frozen like the trapped *Endurance*. Shackleton retrieves the child and sings a lullaby, “The Eye of the Storm,” whose tender lyrics are intended to calm Kat as much as the boy. Despite her ability to act as a muse to Shackleton, his crew, and scores of adolescent video gamers, she lacks the same capacity to inspire herself.

If there is a minor weakness in Milburn and Vigoda’s score, it lies in the cyclical nature of musical reprises that populate the emotional high points of the production, particularly in its second half. While these motifs of theme and variation are obviously modeled after the looping composition that forms

Valerie Vigoda (Kat) laments how her life has turned out in *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me*. (Photo: Jeff Carpenter.)
the spine of the musical's premise, one wishes that there were more original songs and two or three less echoes of the "Star Blazers" theme or the rousing "We're on Our Way."

Peterson directed *Shackleton* with an audacious athleticism on Nichols's icy skeletal grid of a set. Vigoda and McCollum made use of every sparse square inch of the playing area, transforming objects littered across the stage, such as a roadie box and floor lamp, into a sled or a lifeboat with oars. Nichols's projected images informed and interacted with live action as integral parts of the storytelling, even when McCollum hilariously dueled himself as de León for the hand of "fair Katerina." Of note was the fluid incorporation of Endurance crewmember Frank Hurley's archival photographs and film footage of the historical voyage of the *Endurance* into the production's intricate layers of multimedia.

*Ernest Shackleton Loves Me* dared to embark into innovative theatrical territory and pioneered new technical vistas for musical performance, mirroring form and function in an emotionally satisfying exploration of the devastating abyss of depression.


*Dulcey and Roxy at City Hall* is, to quote its Ukrainian playwright Maksym Kurochkin, a "strange play." Disjointed and absurd, alternately humorous and harrowing, it is an artistic reflection of the quickly changing political situation in Ukraine, as envisioned by one of the most important and imaginative Ukrainian playwrights of the contemporary era. Kurochkin, who writes in Russian and resides in Moscow, is a mainstay of the contemporary Ukrainian and Russian stage and cofounder of Moscow's theatre of new drama, Teatr.doc. Commissioned by Austin's Breaking String Theater, which seeks to bring Russian theatre to Austin audiences, Kurochkin's play was conceived on the theme of international collision. It follows the arrival of a wild-haired Ukrainian man named Vadim to Austin's City Hall, where he demands the keys to the city and warns of an impending catastrophic invasion.

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