The current, handsome revival at A Noise Within, directed by Julia Rodriguez-Elliott, captures the fripperies of the household well enough (in large measure thanks to Angela Balogh Calin's divinely over-the-top costumes). And in Freddy Douglas's Tartuffe they have an eminently sinister Rasputin, who teeters tantalizingly on the edge between saint and charlatan. But with an Orgon (Geoff Elliott) tippy-toeing around in a huge Groucho mustache and metallic eyeglasses that might've belonged to Rue McClanahan during the Golden Girls years, and farcical biz that keeps sending the characters tripping over each other, the guts are excised from the drama, pure and simple.

A Noise Within's Tartuffe is far from the first to interpret Orgon as a blithering idiot and to litter the stage with pratfalls. But that fact doesn't make it any easier to witness.

March 24, 2014

Top Girls
Antaeus Theatre Company

Reviewed by Travis Michael Holder

Written in 1982 when the concerns of the feminist movement and the role of women in society were often at their most controversial— and, at times, the most overstated and sometimes even abrasive— Caryl Churchill's absurdist theatrical polemic might seem a tad shopworn three decades later. In less-skilled hands than those of director Cameron Watson and the venerable members of Antaeus Theatre Company, today Top Girls might have stayed on the bottom. Instead, however, the production is vital, sometimes disturbing, and totally smashing. Churchill bursts through the issues of women's right by presenting women through the ages dealing with all the standard topics facing those

March 24, 2014
A Man of No Importance
Torrance Theatre Company
Reviewed by Dany Margolies

David McGee and Mark Torreso
Photo by Brad LaVerne

"A movie is cold comfort for a man who loves the theater," says Alfie Byrne, this musical’s hero. That pretty much sets the tone for the character and for this show. Its major themes will be the making of art and admitting who we are. And the art here will be made by actors who, from star to supporting player, could be working in Hollywood but chose to be onstage in Torrance.

With book by Terrence McNally (based on the 1964 film written by Barry Devlin), music by Stephen Flaherty, and lyrics by Lynn Ahrens, this show shares a pedigree with the expansive Ragtime. Importance is more of a chamber piece than its sister is, telling a smaller story with fewer characters. However, it packs no less of a punch.

In it, Alfie (Mark Torreso) is a middle-aged bus conductor in 1960s Dublin. He may have no importance, but he has poetry in his heart and a passion for the writing of Oscar Wilde. What he really wants to do, though, is direct. He puts writing of Oscar Wilde. What he really wants to do, though, is direct. He puts

importance
David McGee and Mark Torreso
Photo by Brad LaVerne

Although Hughes plays Marlene throughout, each other actor plays several characters, including the employees and clients of Top Girls, an old-style 1980s employment agency managed by Marlene. These include Swain as Louise, an older applicant who wants a change after many years of being ignored for her loyalty on one job; Flaathen as Mrs. Kidd, the pleading wife of a man overlooked for promotion; and Alexandra Goodman as Shona, a job seeker whose impressive résumé proves to be a fraud. Yet it is the intertwining story of Marlene’s disdained abandoned daughter Angie (Marks) and her badly defeated estranged sister Joyce (Flaathen), who was the troubled child as her own, that tugs the hardest at our heartstrings.

This Magnificent Seven of exquisitely consistent character throughout the play and a successful protagonist. Hughes shows that 47-year-old mother (Karianne Flaathen); Dull Gret (Abigail Marks), a Brunnhilde-like peasant from Flemish folklore, said to have led an army of women to pillage Hell; and the long-enduring Patient Griselda (Shannon Lee Clair) from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, whose husband tests her loyalty in a series of bizarre torments based upon the Book of Job.

Playwright Katherine Bates bases this world premiere on the true story of middle-aged factory worker Thomas Montgomery’s deranged, murderous Internet chatroom obsession with a supposed teenage girl—as chronicled in Barbara Schroeder’s 2009 film documentary, talhotblond. Since all the tawdry, cold-blooded facts of this case have been well-chronicled, it is expected that Bates would imbue her play with insights that go beyond the mere events leading up to the 2006 murder of Montgomery’s 22-year-old co-worker and Internet rival for this provocative teen’s online affections. As realized by helmer Beverly Olevin and a struggling ensemble, Bates’s straight-ahead dramatic throughline offers no intriguing, revelatory twists or turns; it simply gets there.

The 90-minute intermissionless piece establishes that 47-year-old Thomas (Mark Rimer) and factory office-mate/part-time college student Alan (John-Paul Lavoisier, alternating with Lane Compton) enjoy an amiable workplace relationship, sharing a mutual attraction to online gaming and casual Internet chatroom distractions to relieve the boredom of the job. Interjecting himself into mix is sarcastic young office clerk Pete (Oscar Cain Rodriguez). When online hottie Jennie (Eirene Elizabeth Patrick), AKA talhotblond, insinuates her presence onto his screen and eventually into his psyche, emotionally fragile Thomas’s civil façade begins to crumble.

Rimer works hard at bringing to life...