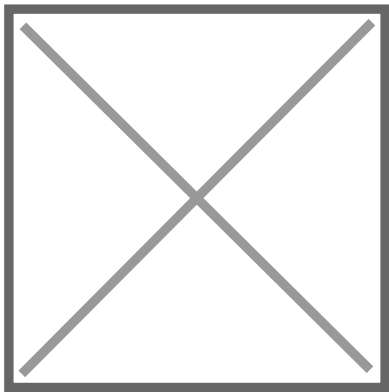




First Weekend Roundup at the Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival: The Variants, Polaroids from the Apocalypse, and Cache Dexter’s 2,045,148,705th Most Interesting Person in the World

Description

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THE VARIANTS by Randall Huskinson

A Curious Modern Plays production, in association with Meanwhile Park
Playwright & Producer: Randall Huskinson | Director: Teresa Sanderson
Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival | July 25 - August 2, 2026

Cast: Annette Wright (Diane), Allen Smith (Blair), Kirt Bateman (Reggie), Eva TerraNova (Julie)
Production Team: Teresa Sanderson (Director), Paul Naylor (Stage Manager), Randall Huskinson (Producer, Scenic & Sound Design)

The Variants is a Covid-era family drama carried almost entirely by phone: calls, voicemails, and family check-ins make up nearly the whole runtime. Fringe festivals are a natural place to test new material, and this one gives audiences something worth sitting with, since the format itself raises a question worth asking of any new play: what does this particular story actually need a stage to do? The play answers that best in its strongest scene.

Huskinson has done a great job writing relatable characters: Diane, Blair, Reggie, and Julie feel like a real family from their very first exchange, easy, funny, a little exasperating with each other in the way actual siblings are, and that likability does a lot of heavy lifting for a show built around a genuinely tricky format. Watching it, the early Covid-era Zoom calls came flooding back almost immediately, that specific mix of staring at a grid of faces and trying to have an actual conversation through it. It wasn't always fun, but it was better than nothing. However, I am not sure whether a play about phone and Zoom calls is best suited to the stage, and the play seems to understand the dilemma.

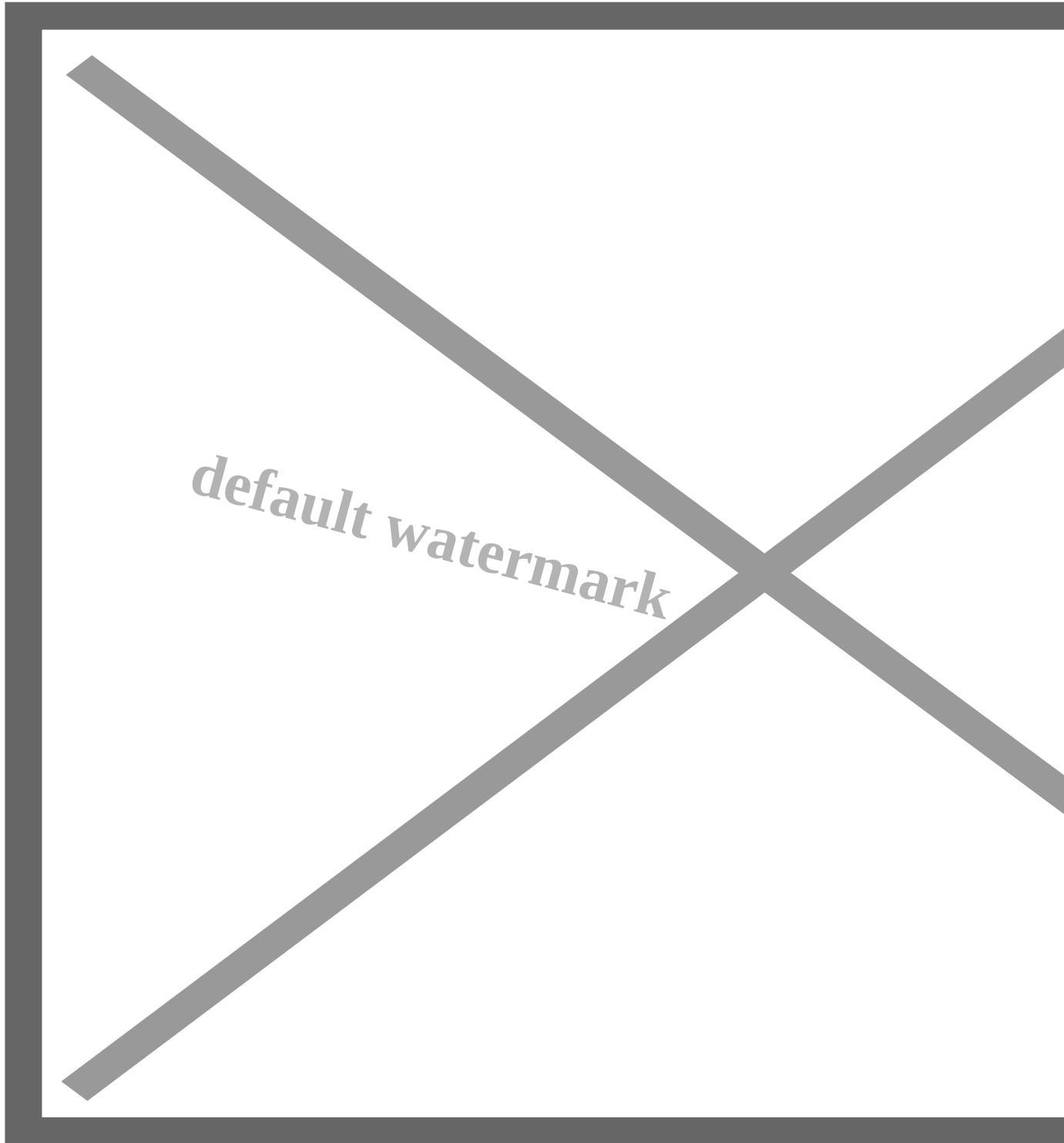
Midway through, brothers Reggie and Blair get on the phone together, each speaking from a separate part of the stage as if to an unseen caller, and what starts as another distanced phone conversation becomes the show's emotional center, as Reggie confides something he's kept from the family for twenty years. At some point in that call, the two actors quietly stop performing a phone conversation and simply cross the stage to stand face to face, in the same space, phones set aside. Nothing in the text explains the shift; it just happens, and it's the moment the show feels most alive. Dropping the phone lets the scene stop being about distance and start closing it.

That contrast says something true about the rest of the show, too. For most of the runtime, actors are placed apart on stage, each in their own lit area, delivering lines into a phone or a laptop camera rather than to each other, which mirrors the isolation at the heart of the material and gives the show a distinct, coherent visual language. It's a smart formal choice for a story about a family kept apart. The tradeoff is that it also asks a lot of the cast, since acting thrives on reading another person in real time, and a phone or video call limits that by design. The Reggie/Blair scene works so well partly because it finally hands that tool back, and the show's closing scene does the same, bringing the full family into the same room for the first time, though the first scene never explains how or why the characters suddenly set the phones aside to speak in person. The final scene, while brief, lands as a genuine payoff. The rest of the family's storylines (vaccine disagreements, conspiracy theories, a motel struggling under occupancy limits, a relationship stalled across a closed border) are compelling as written, and would likely only gain from a few more scenes staged this way, with actors physically together.

Huskinson's strength as a writer and producer is never in question. There are individual lines throughout that are genuinely sharp, and the production is full of thoughtful touches that go beyond the writing itself: printed programs, the only ones at this year's Fringe, and easily the most established-looking set in the festival. It's clear a great deal of work and thought has gone into this production already, and it shows in details easy to take for granted. He's especially skilled at triangulation as a writer: putting one sibling in the middle of two others' conflict, relaying, deflecting, getting pulled into fights that aren't theirs. That keeps scenes from settling into simple back-and-forth arguments even when the format technically limits him to two voices on a call at a time. It's a real skill, and it's a big part of why the show holds together as well as it does.

The show also digs into a good deal of sex-and-relationship material, played broadly for laughs and family mortification. As a preview of an unfinished piece, it's hard to say yet whether that material will deepen further or is mostly serving the comedy for now, and that's a fair, promising thing to leave open at this stage.

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Actor Highlights

Kirt Bateman (Reggie) is pure joy to watch, and that makes the turn in his big scene land hard. He plays Reggie as the obvious favorite, easy, warm, the sibling everyone else measures themselves against, so charming you donâ??t notice how much that ease is covering for, until the moment it finally stops. The reveal doesnâ??t play as a twist so much as a man setting something down.

Annette Wright (Diane) is hilarious, mining every ounce of comedy out of Diane's pageant-mom bluster and delusion. She's also doing quieter work underneath all that noise, and it surfaces once, in a voicemail to Blair, where the bravado drops and something genuinely scared comes through. Wright keeps both versions of Diane fully believable, which is exactly why both land.

Allen Smith (Blair) spends much of the show absorbing the family's jokes at his expense, which sets up more than it first appears to. Once he's on the phone with Reggie and the format drops away, Smith goes quiet in a way nothing earlier in the show prepares you for, and that shift is a big part of what makes the scene feel real rather than staged.

Eva TerraNova (Julie) has the least stage time of the four but does some of the most important connective work, frequently relaying what one brother said to the other and absorbing blowback that isn't hers. TerraNova handles that position with care, never letting Julie feel like a mere plot function, and her inside jokes with Reggie are genuinely endearing, giving Julie a warmth of her own outside of just being the family's go-between.

Beyond the individual performances, the casting deserves real credit: these four read as a family from the first scene, with a shorthand and overlapping rhythm that's often hard to earn this early in a run. Whatever questions the show still has to work out, the ensemble isn't one of them.

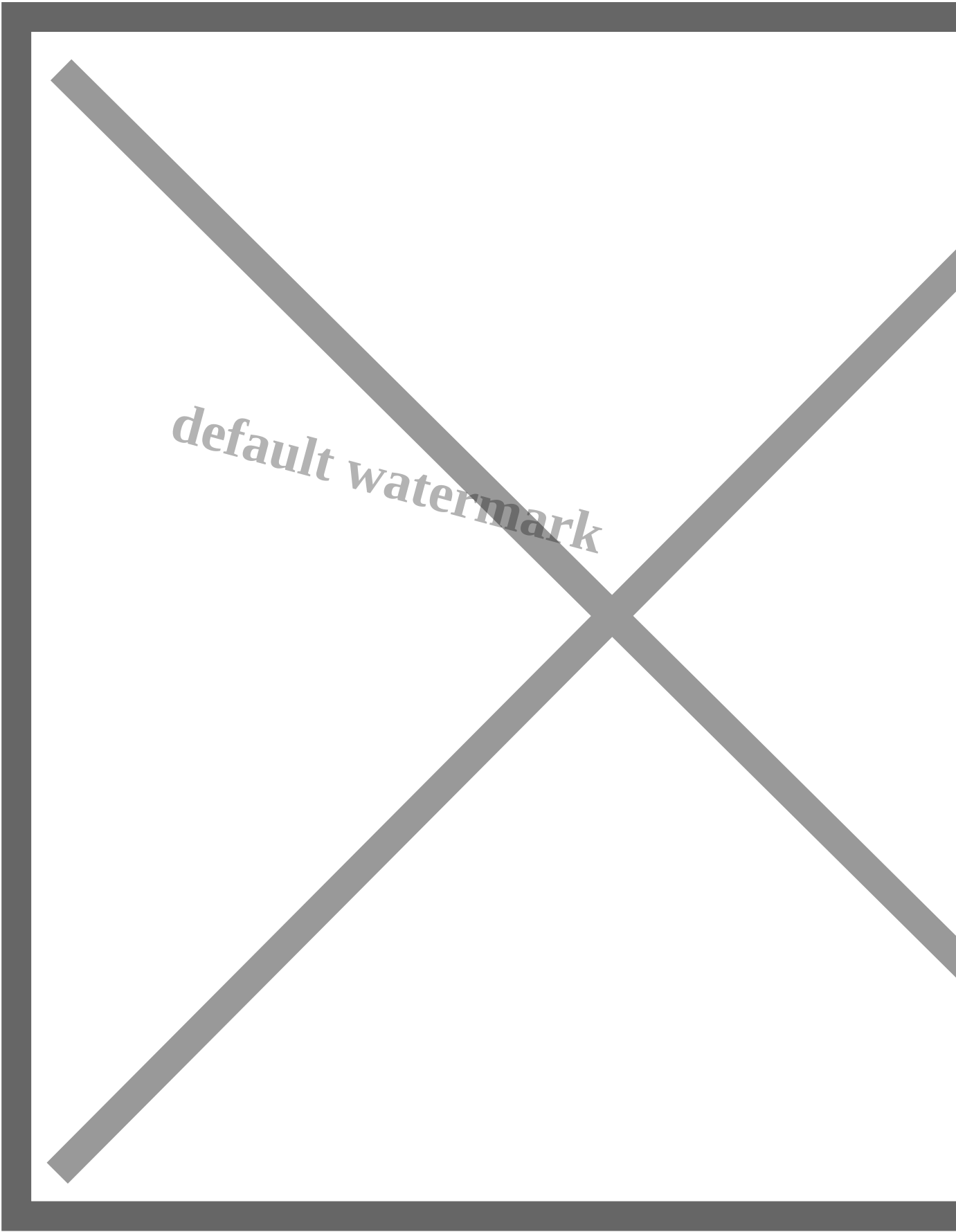
Director Teresa Sanderson deserves real credit as well, particularly for the show's central design challenge: staging a piece built almost entirely around actors on phones, while still knowing exactly when to let that device go so the in-person scenes land as a release rather than a gimmick. That's a genuinely difficult balance, and Sanderson's timing on it is sharp.

Bottom line: This is a talented team all around, cast, director, and playwright alike, and the writing is a real strength throughout. Watching it, the question that kept surfacing wasn't about pacing or polish so much as form: a story built around characters who can't be in the same room together, with dialogue this naturalistic and family dynamics this intimate, might find just as natural a home on screen, where the camera can sit close on a face reacting to a voice on the other end of a call. The moments that land best on stage, the Reggie/Blair scene and the brief closing scene, show just how strong this material is when the actors get to be physically present with each other. That's less a flaw in the piece than a genuinely exciting open question, and one worth sitting with as this promising script continues to develop.

What's Next

This Fringe run is billed as the premiere of the show in this shorter form, but it's not the end of the road. The full-length version of *The Variants* is set to receive a staged reading this fall as part of Salt Lake Acting Company's New Play Sounding Series, on **October 19, 2026**. It'll be worth watching how Huskinson and Sanderson build on this preview, and whether that reading offers any further clarity on the question of stage versus screen.

More information: TheVariantsPlay.com | Instagram: [@playwrightrandall](https://www.instagram.com/playwrightrandall)



Pygmalion Productions's Polaroids from the Apocalypse by Sarah Alanis Morales

Pygmalion Productions, Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival | July 25 - August 2, 2026

Playwright: Sara Alanis Morales | Director: Vicki Pugmire

Cast: Patrick Dahl (Leo), McKalle Dahl (Mom - Patrick and McKalle are real-life mother and son), Shea Potter (Dad), Stevie Anson (Olivia)

Production Team: Vicki Pugmire (Director), Jennie Pett (Stage Manager), Vicki Pugmire & McKalle Dahl (Sound Design)

Pygmalion Productions's staging of Sara Alanis Morales's Polaroids from the Apocalypse, directed by Vicki Pugmire, arrives with a pedigree: the script was reportedly selected from hundreds of submissions for a playwright retreat last year, raising expectations above the average new-work premiere. It's 2095, and an unnamed cataclysm (a gamma ray burst, in this staging) is about to end life on Earth. Everyone knows it's coming, and this family is living out its final day with that knowledge hanging over every scene: the mother compulsively taking Polaroids, the father glacially working his way through Les Misérables, and seventeen-year-old Olivia simmering with anger at both of them.

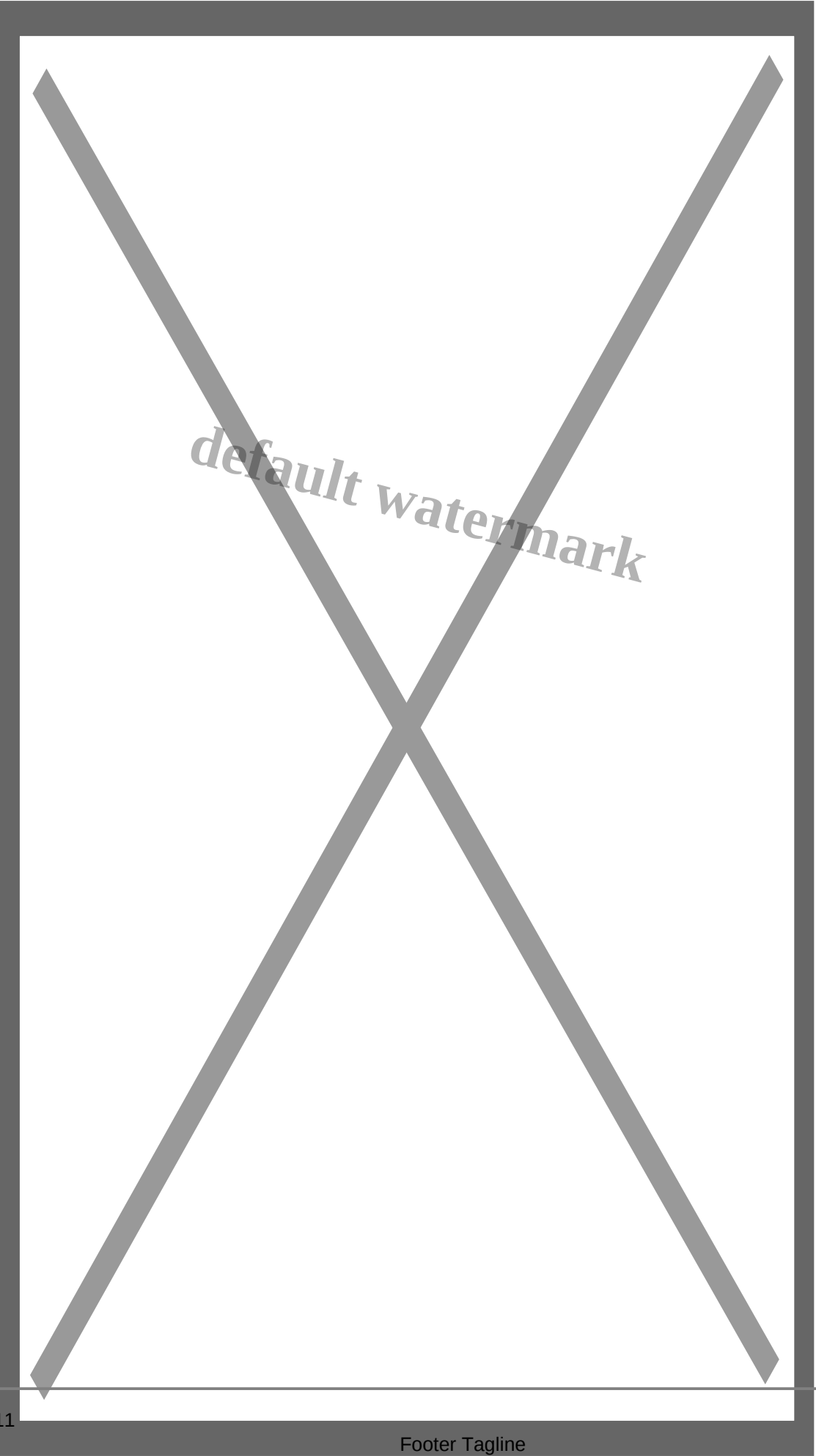
For a play about the end of the world, what stays with you afterward isn't the apocalypse at all, it's the small, ordinary stuff the family keeps reaching for underneath it. The mother's whole project, filling a time capsule with photographs before the end, isn't really about the future civilizations she keeps invoking. It's about proof that this particular, unremarkable family existed and mattered to each other, and the play is at its best when it lets that need sit in plain sight instead of arguing for it. Olivia spends most of the play furious, understandably, at having been born seventeen years before the end of everything, and the play earns her softening rather than rushing it: when her mother finally asks whether she'd rather not have been born at all, Olivia's answer, "I'm glad you did. I'm happy to be here," lands as one of the most quietly moving lines in the piece. Minutes later, in a small aside easy to miss, she tells Leo, unprompted, "You've been an excellent brother." Neither line is dressed up. They just sit there, plainly, the way real family tenderness tends to.

That warmth crests in the photo-box scene near the end, when the family finally sits down together and starts laughing through years of old Polaroids: an unflattering swimsuit photo, a driving-lesson picture labeled "Wreckage," a shot of Olivia asleep that she insists makes her look insane. It's silly and specific and entirely human, four people finding each other again through a pile of mundane pictures, with the world ending just off-stage. The play closes on a single photo labeled simply "Us," a fittingly modest final image for a script that's ultimately less interested in the gamma-ray burst than in what people hold onto in the time they have left.

The AI question hovering around Leo, whether he might be one of the AIs that reportedly "disappeared" into human households after an announcement twenty years earlier, works in service of that same idea more than as a plot mechanism. The script raises it lightly, lets Leo needle the audience with a flat, robotic non-answer before breaking into a laugh, and never resolves it, which

keeps the focus where it belongs: on a family that loves him regardless of the answer. Itâ??s a smaller, gentler use of the premise than a straightforward reveal would have been, even if the ambiguity doesnâ??t always generate as much tension as the setup gestures toward.

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The production doesn't always fully rise to meet the material's more delicate moments. The performances lean toward the biggest beat available in a scene, which can flatten some of the quieter human beats the script is reaching for, and Leo's charm-tipping-into-uncanny doesn't yet read as fully deliberate. There are a few loose threads, too, an unexplained time capsule built to survive an extinction event, a family still fussing over photographs with an hour left, that could use tightening. But none of it undercuts the core of the piece, which is less about the end of the world than about the people trying to hold onto each other inside it.

Credit is due across the board here: Patrick Dahl and McKalle Dahl bring a real, lived-in warmth to Leo and Mom that no doubt comes easier being mother and son off stage as well as on, Shea Potter finds gentle comic timing in Dad's Les Mis obsession, and Stevie Anson carries Olivia's arc from fury to tenderness with care. Behind the scenes, director Vicki Pugmire (who also co-designed sound with McKalle Dahl) and stage manager Jennie Pett deserve recognition for shepherding a script this tonally delicate into its first full staging.

The verdict: a script with real, unforced warmth at its center, especially in that closing stretch with the Polaroids, still finding its footing in staging and tone, but built around a genuinely tender idea worth seeing through.

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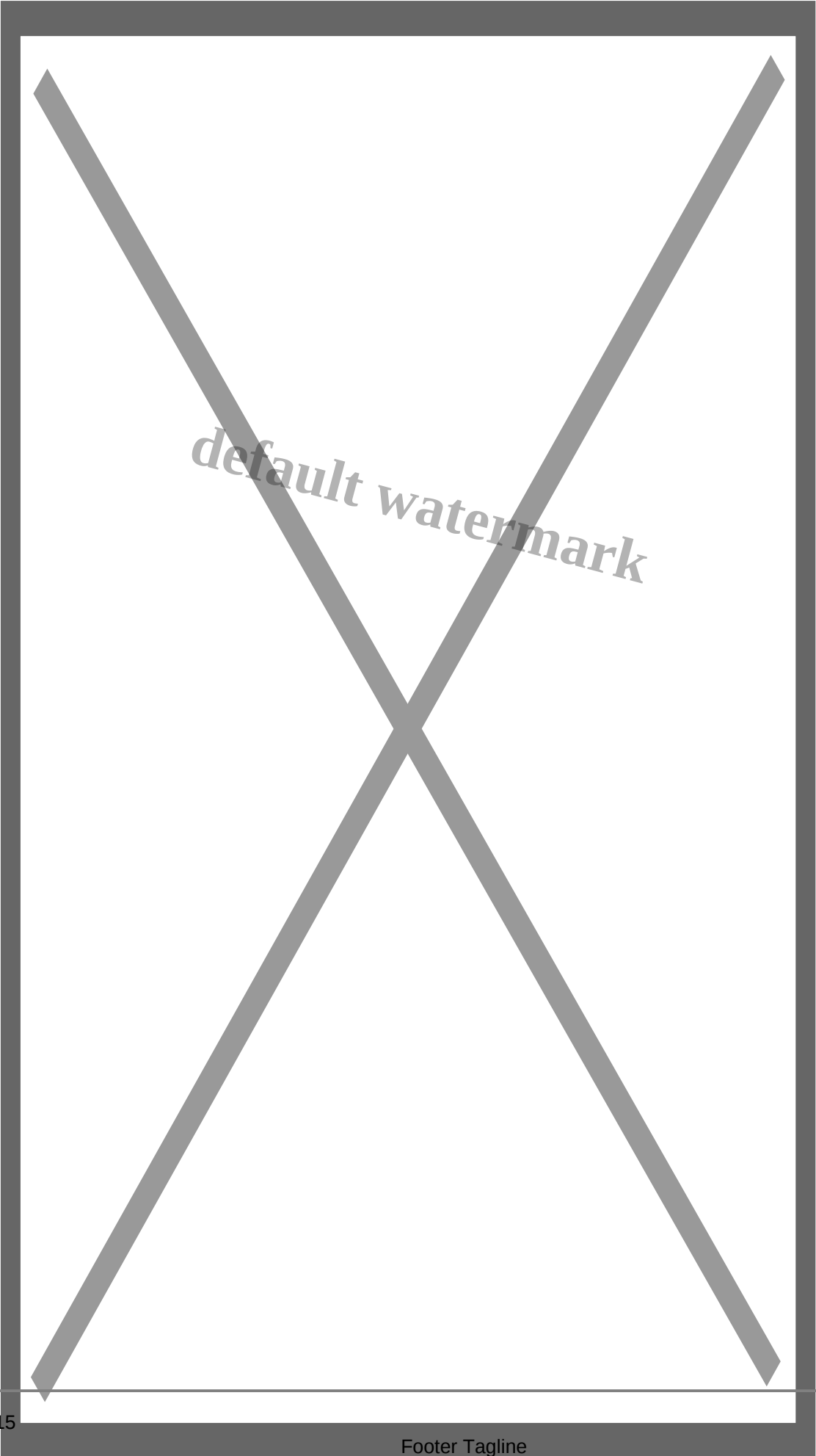
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The 2,045,148,705th Most Interesting Person in the World by Cache Dexter

Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival, Alliance Theatre, Blackbox, July 25 – August 2, 2026

Cache Dexter won a Fringe Pick award last year for a monologue show, and returns with a comic bit built on a fittingly absurd premise: he's ranked one spot behind a person of mysterious and possibly demonic origin on some universal scale of interestingness, and this hour is his attempt to close the gap. That's a great hook, and there's real runway underneath it. The ranking is maintained, letter by letter, by an offstage correspondent named Greg, and Dexter's tactics for climbing it are appropriately unhinged and consistently inventive. He drives an imaginary taxi for mythical creatures. He invents a rotting-onion grief toy called an Onion Buddy. He goes door-to-door buying strangers' socks so he can put on puppet shows about their imagined secret lives. He works at a glue factory that turns the recently deceased into adhesive, graded by how "interesting" they were in life. It's a premise with plenty in it for a genuinely sharp hour of absurdist comedy, and there are real stretches where it gets there, none better than the recurring taxi bit, where Dexter narrates one side of a cab ride with a made-up passenger (a cyclops, on the night in question) and just lets the small talk run: the butcher shop recommendations, the tangent about coral snake rhymes, the polite confusion over the passenger's mangled name. It's the loosest, least "bit-shaped" material in the show, and it's exactly because of that looseness that it's the funniest. Dexter commits to the mundane cabbie small talk so completely that the absurdity of the premise (there's no one actually in the car) barely needs to be pointed at. The Kentucky-Fried-Chicken feud fought to the death with bullets made of fossilized chicken and the deadpan "that slaps my nickel" bit are strong follow-ups in their own right, even if neither quite matches the taxi material for sustained laughs. The door-to-door sock-buying bit belongs in that top tier too.

The one thing holding the hour back is pacing and density. The show throws out bits at a rapid clip, and just as a runner (the sock puppet shows, the glue-factory rankings) starts to pay off, we're already three tangents deep into something else: a journal entry from a different character, a lawyer representing a dog, a men's-grooming parody ad, and some of the connective tissue between them gets a little lost in the shuffle. A few bits (the Pond Man aside, the head-screen "hairstyle of the future" tangent) feel like they were more fun to write than to sit through; they slow the build more than they add to it.



The glue-factory material is the clearest case of a good idea running a bit long. None of this is a knock on the writing itself, though, thereâ??s a real comic mind at work here, and the willingness to swing between deadpan absurdism and an actually earnest point about connection is more ambitious than most hour-long Fringe solo shows attempt. The show would only benefit from trusting its best material (the list, the glue, the audience interview) enough to trim some of the rest and let it land.

Itâ??s also worth separating the material from the performance, because the performer carries this thing beautifully. The delivery is bone-dry throughout, almost no mugging, no winking at the audience, no tonal cue that a joke is a joke, and that restraint is exactly what makes lines like â??that slaps my nickelâ?• or the glue-grading rundown work as well as they do. Itâ??s the kind of dry that trusts the absurdity of the premise to do the work instead of the performerâ??s energy, which is a harder needle to thread than it looks, and itâ??s also what sells the late pivot into the sincere, unscripted-feeling audience interview: because nothing before it was played broadly, the shift into real sincerity doesnâ??t feel like a tonal whiplash so much as the same flat register aimed at something true instead of something silly. A tighter edit catching up to that performance could turn this into a genuinely great show.

Would I recommend it? If you like your comedy dense, referential, and a little shaggy, absolutely. If youâ??re coming off last yearâ??s Fringe Pick expecting a tighter, more singular follow-up, temper expectations slightly, but the premise and the performance are both strong enough to carry the hour regardless.

One last thing worth flagging, because itâ??s easy to lose in a review that spends a lot of time on pacing: Dexter is just an odd, likable presence to spend an hour with, and the showâ??s warmest moment is a small, unplanned-feeling one, when he actually walks the aisles handing out real onions with faces drawn on them as makeshift â??Onion Buddies.â?• Itâ??s a silly, slightly absurd prop, and by all rights it shouldnâ??t work as well as it does, but thereâ??s something genuinely disarming about being handed a hand-drawn onion by a guy mid-bit about grief toys. Under all the density, thereâ??s real charm here, and it comes through often enough to make the hour worth the ticket.

Category

1. Premiere
2. Reviews

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1. Rhetorical Review
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