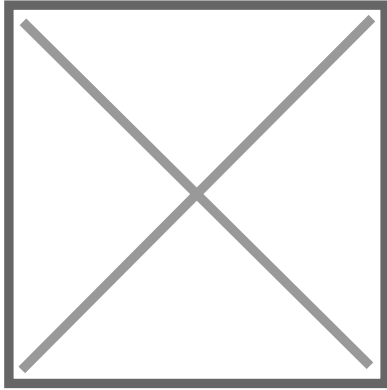


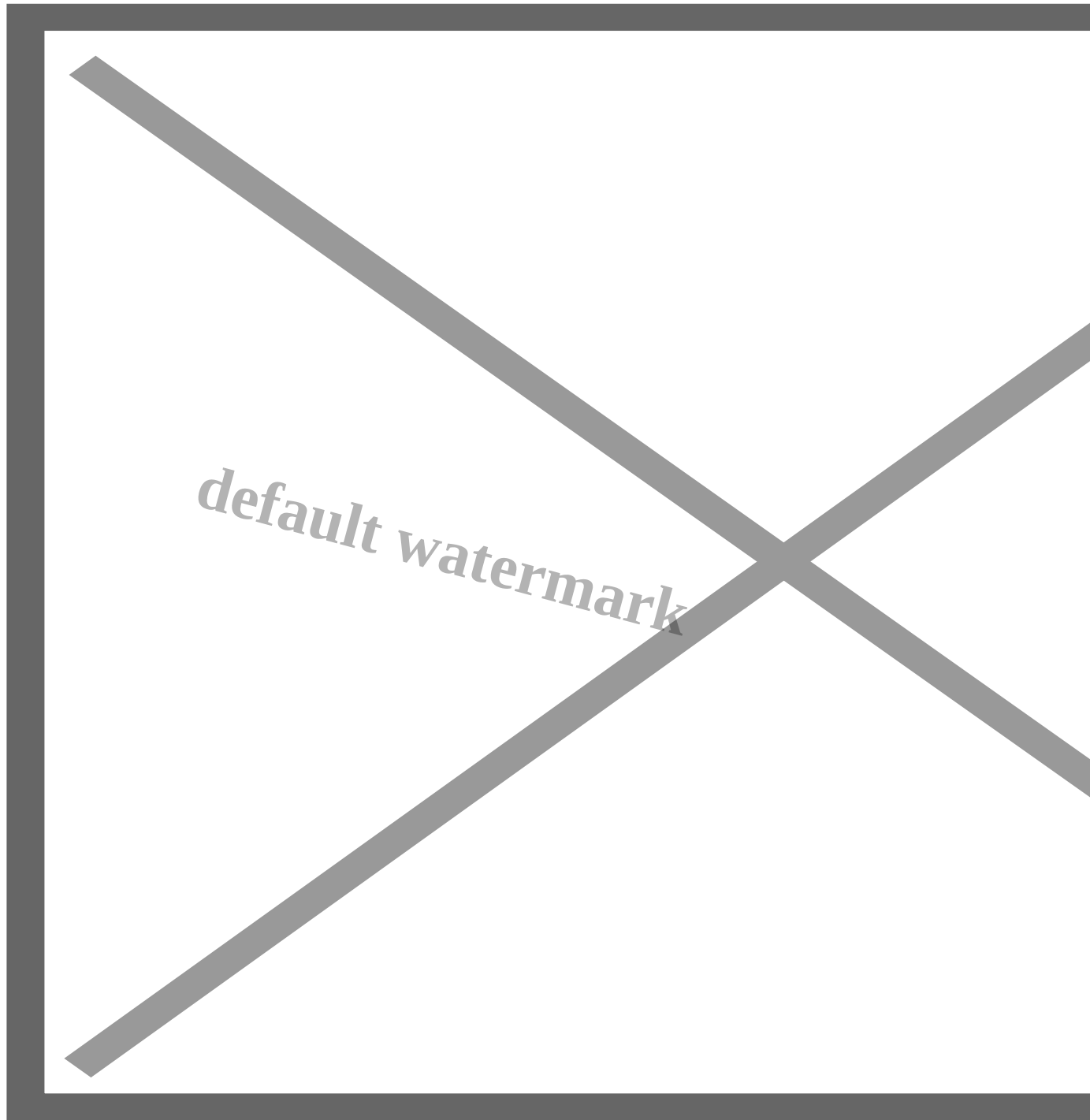


â??Welcome to the New Centuryâ?: A Review of â??The Hissâ?• at Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival

Description

Salt Lake City, UTâ??There is a particular kind of ambition in staging a memory play where nobodyâ??s memory can be trusted, and *The Hiss* commits to that premise with real nerve. The play reconstructs a single night through the eyes of an outsider determined to assemble â??the truthâ?• from a room full of unreliable witnesses. It takes place on the night of the turn of 1999 into 2000, a house party in Seattle where something happened between five young people. Itâ??s part Rashomon, part daytime-talk-show interrogation, wrapped in grunge-era Seattle nostalgia, and for long stretches itâ??s genuinely compelling.

The fairest way to judge a play built entirely around the question of whether the truth is ever really recoverable is to ask the same question of its own craft: does the method the play uses to chase that truth actually earn its meaning, or does it just accumulate?



The structuring device is an outsider cross-examining each guest about what happened that night, while the play cuts between these present-tense interrogations and fragmented, overlapping flashes of the party itself, staged less like clean scene work than like a chaotic night being pieced back together after the fact. Itâ??s a bold structural choice that mostly pays off. Malcolm, the narrator, is unreliable in his own right: visibly out of it for most of his own inquiry, chasing â??the storyâ?• the way an addict chases a high, which keeps the play from ever feeling like itâ??s delivering a neutral account of events. The device strains most in the busiest overlapping scenes, where the audience should feel the blur of a chaotic, half-remembered night but can instead simply lose track of whoâ??s talking to whom.

Underneath the plot mechanics, the play is reaching for something bigger: the way people narrativize their own lives after the fact, and the cost of insisting on a single true story. One character's material stands out as the emotional and intellectual center of the piece. A recurring thread of literary and musical allusion, spanning multiple eras of artistic self-destruction (Rimbaud, Wojnarowicz, Yeats, Cobain, among others), gives that arc a scale the rest of the ensemble doesn't reach, and the play's best-earned symbol, an unfinished self-portrait, pays off in a genuinely unsettling way by the end. The reference isn't decorative: Wojnarowicz himself drew a parallel between the economic collapse of 1970s New York and 1870s Paris, using it to make sense of his own disrupted childhood and early survival on the streets, exactly the throughline Shane's monologue borrows.¹ He also cast Rimbaud specifically as a fellow outsider, someone who could never quite find his footing in a world ready to reject him,² a framing that fits Shane, and arguably Malcolm too, more precisely than generic "doomed artist" mythology would.

Elsewhere, that same reference density is concentrated in shorter exchanges and can read as citation rather than earned meaning; it's really only in this character's extended, central monologue that the density becomes something closer to a genuine self-diagnosis. It's worth asking a little more of the play here: these are characters at a house party, and a touch more groundwork for how they'd have this material at their fingertips would help the references land even harder. I consider myself well-read with two degrees in literature, and still met some of the material referenced for first time, which says less about the play's ambition than about how high a bar it's setting for itself.



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<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/16741/david-wojnarowicz-arthur-rimbaud-in-new-york-photo-series>

The production is also notable for its backdrop: a specifically Utah, specifically Mormon-adjacent setting that's rare territory for this kind of story, and gives the play's theme of performed identity real regional and cultural specificity rather than a generic setting could offer. Several characters navigate real pressure around disclosing who they are, and the play is smart enough to give each of them a different way of managing that pressure rather than treating guardedness as one uniform trait. Being a local production raises the stakes on this landing as authentic care rather than borrowed atmosphere, since a local audience will recognize the setting as their own.

Woven through the party-night material are individual monologues that function almost as arias: private, poetic, stepping outside the plot to give each character a reckoning with where they come from. These are some of the strongest writing in the piece, though their density occasionally slows momentum right when the central mystery wants to accelerate.

The Hiss is messy in the way its subject demands. A play about the impossibility of a clean account probably shouldn't resolve into one, but some of that messiness currently reads as underbaked rather than intentional, particularly in pacing through its final stretch. What holds it together is a genuine point of view about memory, authorship, and the ethics of turning someone else's worst night into your own story, and a title-defining device (the tape hiss bookending the whole piece, and the source of the show's actual title) doing more thematic work than most fringe pieces attempt.

Recommended for fans of nonlinear, ensemble-driven fringe work; anyone with a soft spot for '90s Seattle music mythology; audiences interested in stories about queerness and disclosure in unexpected regional settings.

Which comes back to the question this review opened with: whose story is this actually trying to be, and does the narrative device, an outsider assembling the truth from a room of unreliable witnesses, ultimately earn its keep by the time the play ends? That's a question worth leaving with the playwright rather than answering here.



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Cast and Crew Highlights

Some of what makes that argument land at all comes down to the ensemble carrying it.

Mitch Tyler, as Malcolm, carries most of the play's weight and does it well. He plays the unreliable narrator well, a smugness to him that makes the character's self-mythologizing land, visibly out of his depth in his own investigation without ever tipping into a performance that feels like a clean audience surrogate.

Barry Foster Velasco balances some very tricky scenes as Shane and delivers an extended monologue with real command, authenticity, and range, the kind of specificity and control that makes a dense stack of literary allusion land as genuine self-diagnosis rather than recitation.

Lindsey Brady does a lot of quiet, patient work as Dana, absorbing the play's noisiest accusations for most of the runtime with real restraint.

Laney Lillywhite, who also designed costumes, brings real vulgar energy to Lena, deflecting Malcolm's accusations with a defiance that keeps the character from reading as merely difficult. She also carries a guitar through much of the show and plays it live, rounding out the production's live musical trio alongside Castleberry and Ravago.

Kobe C. Black, as Jason, Malcolm's stepbrother and Lena's on-and-off boyfriend, finds real texture in a character who could easily have gotten lost in the plot's tangle of paternity and loyalty.

Justin Ravago, as Jesse, gets one of the show's best running gags, "welcome to the new century," and also plays live bass in the production itself, a nice bit of overlap given that Jesse is a bass player in the story too. He took Drew Castleberry's compositions and complemented them with that live bass, real collaboration underneath the fictional one. He also brings a fitting quality to a character who ends up the one man the women in this circle seem to genuinely trust, which is no small thing given how little trust gets extended anywhere else in the play.

Drew Castleberry, credited for both sound and piano, keeps a live musical undercurrent running throughout the show and also has a killer voice, though the instruments occasionally overpowered dialogue in the busiest moments. Notably, they told this reviewer this was their first time composing music for a show, a genuinely impressive debut given how much of the production's tone rides on the score.

Rebecca Millett's lighting, especially the red and blue shifts, carries real tonal weight independent of the dialogue.

Selah Degering's live-painted portrait gives the production's central symbol a genuinely unsettling physical presence on stage.

Liz Whittaker's intimacy direction is evident in the care taken with the show's more physically demanding staging.

Show Info

A Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival production by Lark and Loon, at MadKing's Fellowship Theatre

Venue: The Gateway, 167 S Rio Grande, Salt Lake City, UT **Dates:** Friday, July 24 (9 PM) • Saturday, July 25 (6 PM) • Saturday, August 1 (9 PM) • Sunday, August 2 (3 PM) **Tickets:** <https://tickets.greatsaltlakefringe.org/shows/the-hiss>

Cast: Mal, Mitch Tyler Dana, Lindsey Brady Jason, Kobe C. Black Lena, Laney Lillywhite Jesse, Justin Ravago Shane, Barry Foster Velasco Pianist, Drew Castleberry

Crew: Director, Riley Trepanier Stage/Lights, Rebecca Millett Sound, Drew Castleberry Costumes, Laney Lillywhite Intimacy, Liz Whittaker Painting, Selah Degering Facilities, Ailsa Lillywhite

Footnotes

Sam Moore, "A Closer Look at One of David Wojnarowicz's Most Iconic Photo Series," Another, October 27, 2025. <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/16741/david-wojnarowicz-arthur-rimbaud-in-new-york-photo-series> ©

David Wojnarowicz: Arthur Rimbaud in New York, • Leslie-Lohman Museum of Art, Oct. 1, 2025 • Jan. 18, 2026, curated by Antonio Sergio Bessa. <https://leslielohman.org/exhibitions/david-wojnarowicz> ©

Category

1. Premiere

Tags

1. Barry Foster Velasco
2. ensemble drama
3. Fringe theatre

4. Great Salt Lake Fringe Festival
5. grunge era
6. Lark and Loon
7. MadKing's Fellowship Theatre
8. memory play
9. Mormon Culture
10. New Play
11. Rashomon structure
12. Seattle
13. The Hiss
14. unreliable narrator
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