

## ARTS &amp; ENTERTAINMENT

## Where Icons Launch Ideas

By PIA CATTON

Plays about world historical figures and icons of popular culture are in no short supply of late. There's Martin Luther King Jr. depicted in "The Mountaintop," while Sigmund Freud and C.S. Lewis are in "Freud's Last Session." Steve Jobs is the subject of a monologue at the Public Theater, and Judy Garland will be portrayed on Broadway in "End of the Rainbow."

While productions about real-life individuals can be informative, they're often about much more than the people portrayed. "There is truth, which is about facts, then there are essential truths," said Pippin Parker, director of the New School for Drama. "Playwrights are interested in the second one—trying to divine a truth that the historical character may not have even been thinking of."

John Clinton Eisner, producing director of the Lark Play Development Center, where Katori Hall began writing the "The Mountaintop" in 2007, said: "I can send you 10 plays about historical characters, but they're usually about something else."

Ms. Hall set "The Mountaintop," now at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater, on the last night of King's life. The play's emotional core, however, originates from personal history: Ms. Hall's mother wanted to attend King's speech at the Mason Temple (it turned out to be his last) but didn't go due to fear of violence. "She regretted not going to hear him speak," said Ms. Hall. "If my mother was afraid to go, I think he would have been afraid to go."

He was having premonitions and had survived a previous assassination attempt."

The notion of a civil-rights leader dealing with fear then opens up the character to other human habits, such as smoking and having smelly feet. "I asked myself, 'Are we always ourselves?' I was interested in creating a King that didn't step into the preconceived notions of him," said Ms. Hall. "It was very important for me to create almost an alter ego of King."

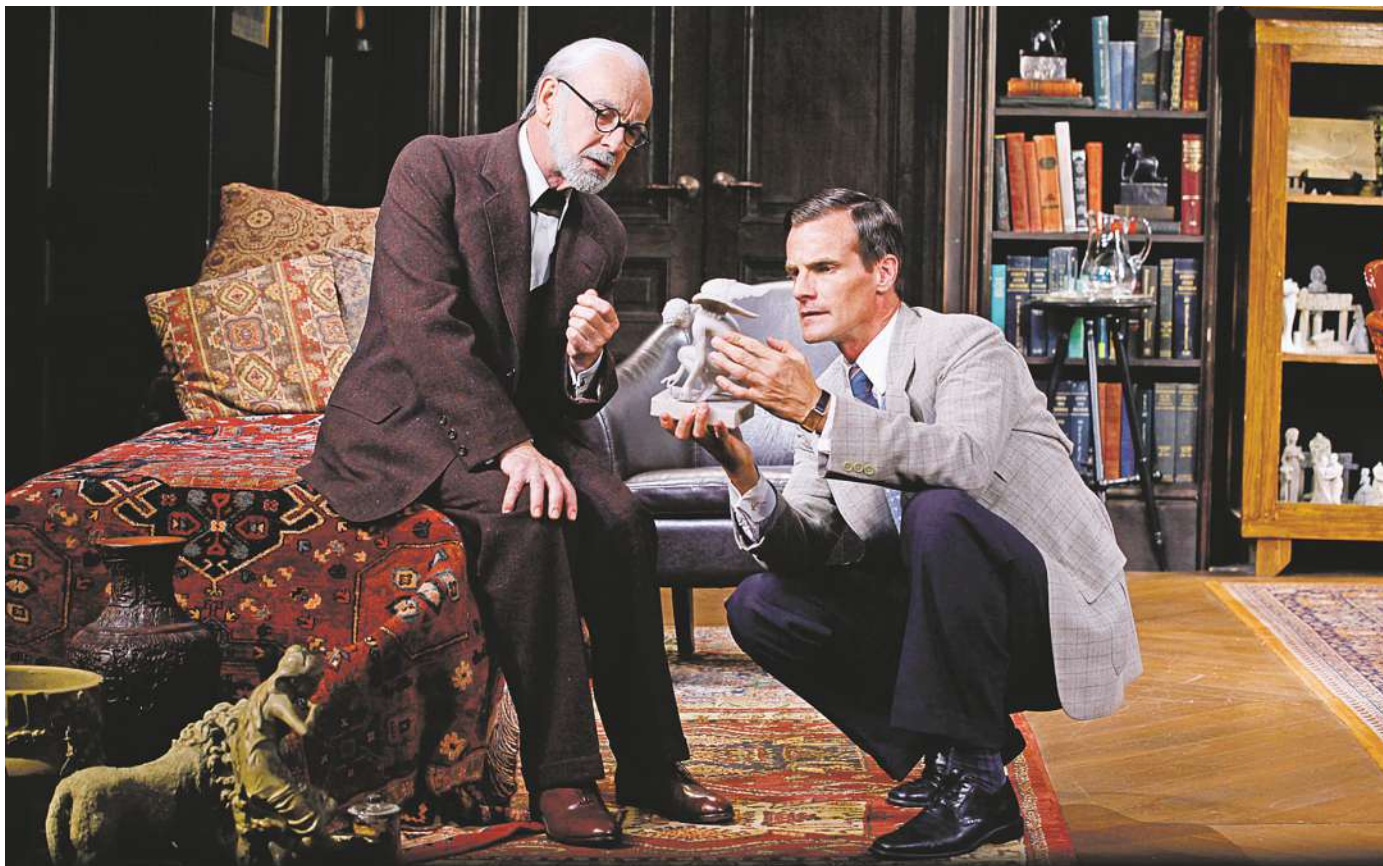
As the play ends, the human character and his story fade away, forcing the question: Who will carry on the legacy? "It's all a metaphor," said Ms. Hall. "We know history."

For actors playing beloved icons, the search for accuracy has pitfalls, according to actress Tracie Bennett, who portrays the last days of Judy Garland in "End of the Rainbow," coming in March. "I didn't want it to be an impersonation," said Ms. Bennett. "There are many men who can do that better than me."

Her approach included months of research—especially on diction and how medication would affect it—and imagining the emotional landscape: "What is it like to be a legend? It's hard to imagine. And it's hard to imagine being a child star."

But in the end, a character—real or fictional—is a character, and the work has its own message. "The play is about the price of fame," Ms. Bennett said.

"Freud's Last Session," at New World Stages, takes up a philosophical, though imagined, debate between Freud and Lewis. Written by Mark St. Germain, the



Above, Martin Rayner and Mark H. Dold in 'Freud's Last Session.' Right, Samuael L. Jackson and Angela Bassett in 'The Mountaintop.'

work is less about the two men than about giving the audience an opportunity to think through the life's major questions. "How often do you get to go to the theater and think about life and death?" Mr. St. Germain said. "People don't go to see Freud and Lewis sing and dance."

He read numerous biographies of each and based the dialog on their stated beliefs. "The scary moment is when you finish the research. Then you see, does it sound real when they talk to each other?" he said. "They have to clash about things that they really believed in."

When the stage work is a monologue, the process can also include personal, realistic obser-

ations. In the case of Mike Daisey's "The Agony and the Ecstasy of Steve Jobs," at the Public Theater, those observations are designed to confront an uncomfortable reality. Mr. Daisey is a self-described Apple aficionado, and the performance shares his alarming discoveries about the production process.

"I don't do monologues about things just because I'm interested in them. I have to believe that my culture needs to hear something that it is not hearing," said Mr. Daisey, who went to China to investigate factories that make Apple products. "It wasn't until I became aware of how labor functions that I realized that there was a story that I



Photo: Carol Rosegg/Associated Press

wanted to tell about Steve Jobs." Mr. Jobs died as the work was in previews, meaning that some text had to be changed, but the core arguments and content were not altered. "They were intensified," said Mr. Daisey.

What his monologue has in common with plays about real figures is the ability to tap into a shared cultural reality. "It's not the job of plays to be history books or even represent history," said Mr. Eisner. "It's the job of plays to represent history with respect to the present moment."

## Paul Goodman: Recounting Forgotten Man on the Attack

By RICHARD B. WOODWARD

Even by the obstreperous standards of other New York intellectuals, Paul Goodman (1911-72) was a special kind of troublemaker.

Anarchist, utopian, World War II pacifist, pied piper of the '60s youth revolt, urban planner, Gestalt therapist, uncloseted bisexual and crusader for gay rights, advocate of sustainable farming, gifted poet and novelist, he exhibited a wayward independence that made him a party of one in the American political arena but that also earned him the wary respect of his peers. Susan Sontag called him one of her heroes. Alfred Kazin and Lionel Trilling, neither one a fan of Goodman's theoretical writings, confessed to a secret envy over his "scandalous reputation."

In his fascinating documentary, "Paul Goodman Saved My Life," opening Wednesday for two weeks at Film Forum, first-time director Jonathan Lee attempts to remedy the present amnesia about this provocative, maddening, complex and divisive figure. The tagline puts it well: "a film about the most influen-



Paul Goodman, right, at an antiwar protest with writer Grace Paley.

tial man you never heard of."

The opening snippet, from William F. Buckley's brainy "Firing Line," underscores the status Goodman once enjoyed. With his rumpled clothes and corn-cob pipe, he was the image of the American cracker-barrel professor eager to mix it up with anyone in a public forum. Magazines in the 1960s solicited his views on the regular tumults of the day.

As the documentary observes,

paperback copies of his "Growing Up Absurd," an impassioned critique of American education, could be found in college dorm rooms during the '60s and '70s. Interviews with writer Grace Paley, journalist Nicholas von Hoffman, playwright Judith Malina, editor Jason Epstein, composer Ned Rorem and sociologist Michael Walzer further testify to the wide circle of Goodman's friends and cultural interests.

The film is less successful at

explaining why his renown has precipitously faded, although hints abound. Too willful to hold any academic appointment—even the far-from-puritainical Black Mountain College asked him not to return in 1950 after he made too many passes at men and women and urinated on the baseball field—he seems to have chosen early in life to make his own crooked way in the world.

Whereas many bright Jewish students at City College of New York in the 1930s became communists (and later anticommunists), Goodman gravitated toward Bakunin, not Lenin. Anarchism and Jeffersonian democracy were his creeds. Big government and big corporations were both the enemy. They stood in the way of what he thought should be the goal of life—personal fulfillment through individual freedom.

"Any intellectual movement that prevented people from creating something new, he had to attack," said Mr. Lee over the phone.

Interviews with Goodman's three daughters and wife suggest that such libertarian principles created tensions in his fam-

ily. Twice married, he became openly gay in the 1940s, when such sexual expression was legally and physically dangerous. For years his routine did not vary. He would write books in the mornings, cruise Times Square for young men in the afternoon, then return home for supper with his wife and children.

He was allowed to have as many affairs as he wanted, but, as his wife, Susan Goodman, says in the film, he forbade her the same autonomy. Feminism may be the only radical movement that passed him by.

The popularity of "Growing Up Absurd" turned him into a prophet of discontent and a "philosopher of the New Left," even though he had no use for violent revolutionaries, or they for him.

"I'm someone who makes sense," he says in the film. "Unlike SDS, which makes none." Lecturing 19-year-olds when in his 50s proved a strain. "I hate their music, which I find very boring," he confesses.

The film argues persuasively that Goodman deserves to be read again. Most of his more

than 20 books are out of print and histories of the period have shamefully neglected him. He doesn't rate a single mention in Michael Kazin's "American Dreamers: How the Left Changed a Nation," and the Library of America chose not to include his writings in its canonical series.

According to Mr. Lee, Goodman's youngest daughter, Daisy Goodman, believes that were her father alive today he would be in downtown New York, siding with the Occupy Wall Street demonstrators and instructing them.

"I know what ails these young people," he says in a clip from a 1960s student rally. "I think I know what in our society has caused it. Morally, they're 100% in the right. But they won't discover it by themselves. Never, never, never."

Was Goodman an admirably brave nonconformist who resisted all forms of authority? Or was he impossibly selfish and naive, an idealist with too high an opinion of his own woolly-minded thoughts and too little respect for those of others?

Mr. Lee presents ample evidence that either answer, or both, may be true.

THE POP SCENE | By Andy Battaglia

## Oddities of Sound Abound in City

## Cant

◆ Bowery Ballroom  
6 Delancey St., (212) 533-2111  
Oct. 25

As a member of the vaunted indie band Grizzly Bear, Chris Taylor helps make prissy, prim folk-rock songs that sound as if they were concocted in a laboratory and only later softened up so as to be marked as artisan-approved. For his side-project Cant, he strays from delicacy and messes things up—much to the benefit of all. Mr. Taylor's voice will be familiar to fans of Grizzly Bear, but

otherwise, on an intriguing debut album titled "Dreams Come True," Cant favors more experimental sounds that wander.

## Alarm Will Sound plays Apex Twin

◆ Roulette  
509 Atlantic Ave., Brooklyn  
(917) 267-0363  
Friday

Alarm Will Sound is an ambitious group devoted to "new music" (read: classical music that is not classical) and new ways to question more or less everything tied to tradition. To that end, the

group—usually numbering around 20 members—will perform a program here devoted in part to Apex Twin, the inimitable and inscrutable electronic-music artist known in the 1990s to drive around London in a tank. For its contribution to the ongoing festival "SONIC: Sounds of a New Century," Alarm Will Sound plans to perform an ensemble arrangement of Apex Twin's spastically rhythmic song "Omygyja Switch 7" (from a 2001 album titled "Drukqs"), as well as work by the composers David T. Little, Nico Muhly, Stefan Freund, Aleksandra Gryka and Matt Marks.

## "Weird Al" Yankovic

◆ Beacon Theatre  
2124 Broadway, (212) 465-6500  
Sunday

Those who proclaim the loss of a musical monoculture still have "Weird Al" Yankovic to contend with. For all the ways that scaleable pop has refracted and dispersed in recent years, hit songs still have one sure way to be affirmed, even consecrated, as classics for the ages: a parody cover by the man behind such curios as "Eat It," "Amish Paradise" and "Girls Just Wanna Have Lunch." Mr. Yankovic has kept busy since hitting his spoof-streaked peak in the '80s and early '90s. This year alone has seen the issue of a popular children's book titled "When I Grow Up," as well as a new album, "Alpocalypse."

## Amon Tobin

◆ Brooklyn Masonic Temple  
317 Clermont Ave., Brooklyn  
(718) 638-1256  
Oct. 25-27

Amon Tobin is a master of a kind of electronic music that privileges complexity and weight, with as much abstraction as can be made to bear. His beats borrow patterns and inflections from hip-hop, but their crashing, careening musical backdrops are all the more suited for a warehouse rave. More important than any of that is the introduction this year of a hi-tech stage show developed with a team of audio-visual collaborators that is designed to push the outer edges of digital art.



## Odd Future

◆ Terminal 5  
610 W. 56th St., (212) 582-6600  
Wednesday

The taunting, teasing, transgressive hip-hop enterprise known as Odd Future has charted quite a rise over the past year. The group's distinctive raps, once just the business of a collective of young skater friends from Los Angeles, have caught notice of rabid fans and impassioned detractors alike. The story behind the music has turned out compelling characters in mastermind Tyler the Creator and Earl Sweatshirt, a precocious wordsmith whose mysterious whereabouts have inspired flurries of investigative reporting. And the aura surrounding Odd Future, even as the group's antics grow more familiar, retains a bracing sense of danger.

Part of that is a real thrill, owing to a genuine sense of unpredictability. Another part draws from a store of tics and tropes that tend toward vile violence and misogyny. It remains to be seen how much the art and the juvenilia are intertwined.

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