

Hip-hop Friday nights at Christ Tabernacle in Queens belong to a joyful under-25 congregation.



# THE BIG CITY, HOLIER THAN YOU SUSPECTED

Photographer Lanie McNulty examines New York City's world of worship in 'Lifted Up'

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA / STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

**R**ed-state heartland cities — St. Louis or Salt Lake City or Nashville, Tenn. — might be hotbeds of spiritual ambition.

Not crazy New York. Church does not leap immediately to mind when you think of New York.

Photographer Lanie McNulty might change that. Her long-term investigation, "Lifted Up in New York," has caught all kinds of 21st-century New Yorkers in the act of worship.

The city is holier than we know. "Lifted Up" opened this month in the All Things Project Gallery, a Manhattan storefront that looks like a neighborhood exhibition/performance space, but is actually a Congregational church. It presents admission-free concerts and visual art during non-church time.



McNulty



PHOTOS COURTESY OF LANIE MCNULTY

In the Bronx, the Love Gospel Assembly's prayer walk took participants into the 46th Precinct stationhouse.



At the College of Staten Island in 2005, an abrupt moment of prayer.

SEE CITY, PAGE B 7

## Combining history and new art at Snug Harbor



PHOTO COURTESY OF PATRICK GRENIER

Patrick Grenier's resume includes the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

New director of visual art 'very excited' about his vision for the cultural center

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA  
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

When he first visited the Newhouse Center for Contemporary Art 15 years ago, Patrick Grenier hardly imagined he'd be running the place some day.

Grenier, 39, is the new director of visual art at Snug Harbor Cultural Center and Botanical Garden, which encompasses Newhouse.

He's "very excited" by his own account.

"It's a very dynamic sort of cultural institution, partly historical, partly contemporary. It kind of reflects

my own career," he said.

Grenier has worked at cultural institutions that are saturated with history — like Cooper Union and the Brooklyn Museum — and at places that are, by comparison, barely unwrapped: The Rotunda Gallery in Brooklyn and New Museum.

### THE NEW JOB

The "exciting part" of the new job, he said, will be the chance to combine the two, historical presentations and new art.

Grenier, who lives with his wife in Hoboken, N.J., earned a bachelor's degree in art and art history from Pratt Institute and a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies from New York University.

SEE SNUG, PAGE B 7

## UP, UP, AND AWAY



PHOTO BY ROY ROUND

American Ballet Theater's Ethan Stiefel, airborne in "The Prodigal Son." For a preview of ABT's spring season, turn to page B 7.

## ADVANCE BUZZ Let us count the ways

Juilliard alums and guest stars Mandy Patinkin and Patti Lupone will help guests compile their lists for the "50 Reasons We Love Lincoln Center" 50th anniversary gala on May 28. For more information, visit [www.lincolncenter.org](http://www.lincolncenter.org).



## ARTS &amp; LEISURE

## Dark 'Offices' deals with workplace pressures

By MICHAEL KUCHWARA  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

Timing, as they say in show biz, is everything. And "Offices," the latest trio of one-act comedies by major film guy turned playwright Ethan Coen, could not have arrived at a more appropriate time, what with the economic downturn sparking rampant job insecurity.

And insecurity is at the heart of these slight, darkly comic playlets (total running time: Barely 80 minutes), now playing at off-Broadway's Atlantic Theater Company.

Like "Almost an Evening," Coen's maiden effort at the Atlantic last season, these timely works breeze by with a cinematic effortlessness. That's partly the result of director Neil Pepe, who moves the production at lickety-split speed, and a nimble cast, including F. Murray Abraham, that doesn't miss a beat. Their dexterity is commendable since many of the scenes in each of the plays are almost blackouts, barely minutes long.

All three plays deal with a variation on office stress, a condition Coen sees as endemic to the workplace. It's a cold, cruel world in those cubicles, the playwright seems to be saying, and don't expect folks who are also under the gun to engender much concern for other people's problems.

The first play has the ominous title of "Peer Review," and contains a riotous, obscenity-spewing performance by Joey Slotnick as an employee who takes objection to what his fellow employees are saying about him.

Slotnick's outrage engenders little sympathy from the others, three fellow drones played by Aya Cash, Daniel Abeles and C.J. Wilson, as well as from his boss, an icily contained Abraham.

The second effort is called "Homeland Security" and the sketch finds its center in paranoia more than insecurity. It's set, well, in the Department of Homeland Security where a government worker named Munro spends most of his time looking for his missing briefcase. Or at home, where he deals with a surly daughter, a resentfully supportive wife and an Internet-obsessed son. And still can't find that briefcase.

As played by the crisply funny John Bedford Lloyd, Munro projects a bureaucratic efficiency, saying to his fellow workers, "We're gonna worry. That's what we do. We worry. So that other people don't have to." Yet agitation lurks in the heart of this seemingly innocuous governmental cog.

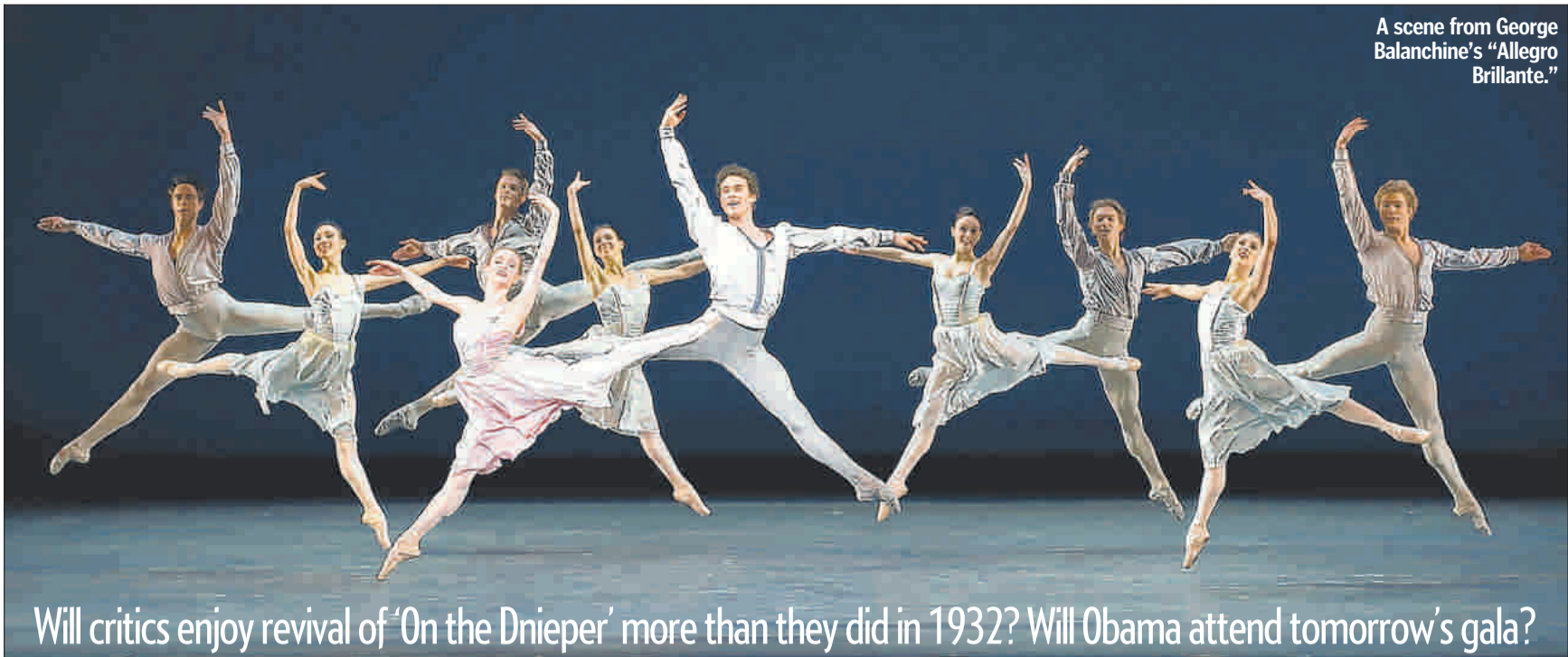
Even more anxiety and laughs permeate "Struggle Session," the most ripped-from-the-headlines of the three plays. Here Coen takes on both the hiring and firing of employees and what each does to the people who have to perform those duties.

The ever-resourceful Abraham scores big time, playing a randy, homeless man suddenly transported back to a corporate environment. Coen's dialogue is lightning fast and the actor handles it with hilarious results.

Both "Offices" and "Almost an Evening" are artful, if small works, more appetizer than five-course theatrical meal. But in both, the writer who helped create "Fargo" and "No Country for Old Men" has demonstrated he can create for the stage as well as for the movies. Now we need a full, two-act play from the man.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BONEAU/BRYAN-BROWN  
F. Murray Abraham and Daniel London in "Struggle Session," one of three plays in Ethan Coen's collection called "Offices."



A scene from George Balanchine's "Allegro Brillante."

Will critics enjoy revival of 'On the Dnieper' more than they did in 1932? Will Obama attend tomorrow's gala?

PHOTO COURTESY OF GENE SCHIAVONE

## Questions surround ABT's spring season

By MICHAEL J. FRESSOLA  
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

Can a ballet that bombed 77 years ago make a 2009 New York audience happy?

We shall see.

For the spring season (which starts tomorrow at the Metropolitan Opera House), American Ballet Theater (ABT) has revived/redone "On the Dnieper," a romance in the Ukraine.

It had music by Sergei Prokofiev and choreogra-

phy by Serge Lifar. The fact that these were imaginative and first-rate artists didn't insulate them from criticism.

In 1932, when "On the Dnieper" had its Paris Opera Ballet premiere, critics booted. Apparently, they were expecting something more like "The Prodigal Son," a previous triumph.

ABT has commissioned a new version (same music, re-made dances) by Aexei Ratmansky, ABT's current artist in residence. It will premiere June 1.

The other big question

mark is: Will the president and first lady make an appearance tomorrow at the opening-night gala. (They are honorary chairs.)

Company insiders say that Michelle Obama is expected. The president, who seems to take great pleasure in his wife's presence, is a definite maybe.

### A RUSSIAN SEASON

Overall, the spring season is remarkably Russian. It has some all-Prokofiev evenings and some Tchaikovsky/Balanchine programs. All (the two composers and the cho-

reographer) are Russian-born.

Also, the company's most beloved Russian ballerina — Nina Ananiashvili, a native of Georgia — will give her farewell performance on June 27.

The all-Prokofiev program (eight performances) has a premiere — "Desir," choreographed by James Kudelka and danced to "Cinderella," and Balanchine's "The Prodigal Son."

The Balanchine/Tchaikovsky menu (eight shows through May 25) will

start with Gillian Murphy as the lead in "Allegro Brillante" on Tuesday.

The other pieces are "Tchaikovsky Pas de Deux," "Mozartiana" and "Theme and Variations."

Naturally, the season has many of the full-evening staples of the repertory — "Giselle," "La Sylphide," "Swan Lake," "Sylvia" and "Romeo and Juliet."

For the whole spring season picture, visit [www.abt.org](http://www.abt.org).

Michael J. Fressola is the Advance arts editor. He may be reached at [fressola@siadvance.com](mailto:fressola@siadvance.com).



PHOTO COURTESY OF BLIND PIG

"Sugar Shack," Damon Fowler's fourth album and first for label Blind Pig, sounds like a classic-roots rock album with timeless appeal. Discerning and of an eclectic bent, Fowler deftly breathes fresh life into what used to be standard fare — blues, country and R&B motifs.

### MUSIC REVIEW

## Fowler puts sweet touch on new CD 'Sugar Shack'

"Sugar Shack," Damon Fowler (Blind Pig)

By TOM WRIGHT  
STATEN ISLAND ADVANCE

It's oh-so-easy to get swept away in the hype and experimental buzz of contemporary indie-rock. Unfortunately, all too often, the superficial bells and whistles can't cover up the obvious recycling and lack of substance that many musicians spin out as new and inventive.

In truth, few are bringing anything really innovative to the table. Many have dispensed with song structure all together, letting various effects do the talking.

You know times have turned inside-out when straightforward rock and blues sound refreshing.

That's what's happened with Damon Fowler. He's a revivalist, of sorts, who's been under the radar for a decade now, and audiophiles should really take a listen: He's a master at making the old sound new again.

"Sugar Shack," his fourth album and first for Blind Pig, sounds like a classic-roots rock album with timeless appeal. Discerning and of an eclectic bent, Fowler deftly breathes fresh life into what used to be standard fare — blues, country and R&B motifs.

It doesn't hurt that the Florida native is an ace guitarist. His picking recalls the prowess of such luminaries as Johnny Winter, Dave Edmunds and Duane Allman. If you need further confirmation, he was recently voted "Best Guitarist ... And Slide Guitarist ... And Lap Steel Player ... And Dobro Player" in a "Best of Tampa" poll for Creative Loafing magazine.

Vocally, Fowler recalls Nick Lowe's amiable intonation and Rockpile's economic, good-time thrust.

As the disc rolls on, Fowler delves into all kinds of terrain. There's the grit of the Black Keys, John Fogerty ("I Hope It's Gonna Rain") and Bonnie Raitt ("Lonely Blues"); the reggae-influenced pub rock of "Wrong Side Of The Road"; the Lightnin' Hopkins-styled swamp blues of "Sugar Shack," and the masterful Delta strut of "Sugar Lee."

Add a few inventive treatments (a la Rockabilly, pub rock and Tex-Mex) on Billy Joe Shaver's "I'm Just an Old Chunk Of Coal," Merle Haggard's "Tonight The Bottle Let Me Down" and the Amazing Rhythm Aces' "Third Rate Romance" and you have one irresistibly smokin' sound-sation.

It's a shame that Fowler continues to fly so off the radar, because "Sugar Shack" is highly accessible and stands as one of the year's best — no matter what genre you prefer.

Tom Wright reviews CDs for the Advance. He may be reached at [wright@siadvance.com](mailto:wright@siadvance.com).

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CITY FROM PAGE B 8

## The big city, holier than you suspected

Historically, religious practice has engaged photographers. The unparalleled assortment of responses in America has been particularly attractive.

Robert Frank and Walker Evans shot congregations. Jeff Jacobson shot charismatic snake-handling Christians in his "My Fellow Americans" series. Ten years ago, Thomas Roma photographed black congregations in Harlem to considerable acclaim.

### INSIDER'S VIEW

Ms. McNulty, who studied at the International Center of Photography, figures that she differs from most church-going photographers. They are dispassionate observers. She's a pro-faith insider.

As a believer, "I think I see things differently," she said last week. And congregations see her differently, she's learned.

She takes pains to be unobtrusive. She uses available light, not flash, a costly decision. A great shot can become invisible without sufficient light. In most places, the pastor introduces her at the start of the service.

"Lifted Up in New York"

(30 black-and-white gelatin silver prints) travels the city, from an Upper East Side congregation to a prayer circle in a precinct stationhouse in the Bronx to the Christ Tabernacle in Queens, where a Friday night hip-hop music and dance service is available only to members under 25.

The faithful in this congregation look like any happy young people. Out of a religious context, it's easy to see them as kids at a concert. On National Prayer Day (May 7, 2005), she reported to the College of Staten Island, where hundreds had assembled.

She's sharp-eyed. Half the challenge is being ready to shoot the perfect moment. In "The Usher," she spotted a man with a job to do — his jacket says "usher" — overcome with prayerfulness.

He's fallen to his knees, head bent, hands clasped, eyes closed.

Many of the photographs depict the faithful in a state of obvious joy or prayerful detachment. At the Greater Allen AME Cathedral in Queens, where dancing is part of the service, she shot "Seraphim," white-robed congregants dancing in an angled, soft-focus composition.

Ms. McNulty, 45, an Upper West Side mother of three, was, by her own account, "a seeker" for years. "I am a New Yorker ... I never knew anyone who ever talked about a relationship with God."

She was curious. Her own breakthrough came when an acquaintance suggested she check out Trinity Baptist Church in Manhattan. She liked it, and still attends.

In 2007, she made a church-sponsored trip to Rwanda. She shot "From the Ashes of Rwanda," a series about recovery, while there.

"Lifted Up" remains a work in progress. She hasn't photographed Roman Catholic or Orthodox parishes yet. Last week, lots of candidates had been submitted: "People who are stopping at the gallery are giving me plenty of suggestions about where I should go next."

"Lifted Up" is at *All Things Project Gallery, 269 Bleecker St., Manhattan, through the end of the month. The gallery is open Wednesday to Saturday, from 1 to 6:30 p.m.*

Michael J. Fressola is the Advance arts editor. He may be reached at [fressola@siadvance.com](mailto:fressola@siadvance.com).

SNUG FROM PAGE B 8

## Combining history, art at Snug Harbor

At New Museum, he helped produce "After Nature," a well-received survey that was part of the museum's inaugural season. At Rotunda Gallery, where he was associate director, Grenier programmed events, administered residencies and fellowships and supervised the installation of exhibits.

Grenier replaces Frank Verpoorten, who came to the Harbor from the Dahesh Museum. Grenier has not yet planned a season of exhibits. A show of LEMUR ("League of Electronic, Musical Urban

Robots") will open in the fall.

The new curator recalled that he first visited the Harbor in 1994-95 when the big on-site exhibit was "Making a Frame." The multi-media show, a history of performance art with an ambitious performance series, was drawing visitors and press from all over the metropolitan area.

Nothing approaching its scale has been attempted at the center in the past four

years. "That show just blew me away," Grenier said, "and I immediately admired the curator, Olivia Georgia, because the show was so interesting and comprehensive." Ms. Georgia, now executive director of the House Foundation for the Arts, was visual arts director from 1990 to 2004.

Michael J. Fressola is the Advance arts editor. He may be reached at [fressola@siadvance.com](mailto:fressola@siadvance.com).

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