

The New York Times

Review: ‘Tumacho,’ a Rootin’-Tootin’ Musical, Keeps Its Poker Face

By BEN BRANTLEY / July 3, 2016 / NY Times Critics’ Pick

As the setting is a saloon in the wildest of Wests, it seems right fittin’ that every blessed member of the cast of “Tumacho,” which opened last week in a sweet tequila haze at the Wild Project in the East Village, is terrific at keeping a poker face. And, man, it can’t be easy.

This impeccably inane horse opera by Ethan Lipton, directed with cantering wit by Leigh Silverman, is filled with temptations for “corpsing.” That’s the term for what happens when performers crack one another up onstage, though given the high body count of Mr. Lipton’s script, you are excused for inferring other meanings.

Consider, for example, that two-way conversation between a three-legged coyote and a barkeeper, or the several sequences that require the ensemble to impersonate cactuses, or the scene in which everybody has to assume the ready, willing and able postures appropriate to being ravaged by the sexually omnivorous evil spirit of the play’s title.



From Left, Gibson Frazier, Randy Danson, Jeremy Shamos, Omar Metwally and Celia Kennan-Bolger in “Tumacho.” Credit: Sara Krulwich for The New York Times

Or how about the head-spinning stretch of dialogue in which one character, who has been bound to a chair by a homicidal gunslinger, tries to explain to another what “ineffable” means? As performed by Celia Keenan-Bolger and Jeremy Shamos, the exchange assumes the surreal circularity of Abbott and Costello’s “Who’s on first?” routine.

Yet only rarely does anyone in this musical production, which features Tex-Mex ditties for piano, guitar and banjo (all played with vernacular ease by Mike Brun), evince the quivering chin that betrays that these performers think that what they’re doing is at all funny. The audience will find itself incapable of similar stoicism.

“Tumacho” is this summer’s third and final offering in the annual Summerworks season from the downtown incubator of antic theater Clubbed Thumb, and it bids fair to become the sleeper that last year’s play in the same slot did. That was “Men on Boats,” Jaclyn Backhaus’s account of a real-life 19th-century expedition in the Western wilderness, which featured all-male characters embodied by a nonmale cast, which reopens later this summer at Playwrights Horizons.

Like that subversive charmer, “Tumacho” plays dizzily with historical notions of American manliness (just pronounce its name), but in a more willfully absurdist key. Mr. Lipton, a writer and cabaret performer who specializes in deadpan drollery (“Red-Handed Otter,” “No Place to Go”), has said that this play was partly inspired by the epidemic of gun violence in the United States.

What he has created, though, is hardly op-ed theater. Mr. Lipton takes up arms to disarm, with a cathartic exercise in wish fulfillment that even as it draws blood (in a variety of ways), drains the testosterone from the classic shoot-’em-up. To do so, he has enlisted a Broadway-pedigree crew that includes, in addition to Ms. Silverman (a Tony nominee for “Violet”), the inventive designers David Zinn (sets) and Anita Yavich (costumes), and an ensemble of pros known for hair-trigger timing.

The resulting work pays homage not only to cowboy classics, à la “High Noon,” but also to their gorier descendants, as rendered by the likes of Sam Peckinpah and Sergio Leone, not to mention all those eye-glazing

zombie and vampire series that occupy the time of television bingers. There's also a goofy glimmer of the sexual psychodrama of those bizarre 1950s western noirs "Johnny Guitar" and "Rancho Notorious."

The teeming plot is centered on a prairie village rotting from lawlessness: "a one-horse town where the horse broke down," to quote the opening song. That its population has shrunk from a thousand to maybe "20 on a good day" has much to do with the reign of terror brought on by Big Bill Yardley (Danny Wolohan), a man in black who lives to kill.

This state of civic decrepitude is the bane of the ineffectual Mayor Evans (John Ellison Conlee), whose problems are about to become a lot worse. According to Sam (Bill Buell), the resident oracular old-timer, when the streets run red with blood, and the three-legged coyote howls, the ghost of the baddest man who ever lived in the area, Tumacho, returns to inhabit the body of one of the townsfolk and become a bloodsucking tyrant.

You'd need an advanced GPS to follow the roads the plot takes from this premise. All you really need to know is that those who map its perilous paths onstage are experts in pursuing silliness seriously.

The candidates for demonic possession here include Ms. Keenan-Bolger ("The Glass Menagerie" on Broadway) as the revenge-thirsty Catalina Vucovic-Villalobos (try saying that with a swollen tongue, as she must); Mr. Shamos as Big Bill's foodie chef (and hostage negotiator) of a sidekick; and Jennifer Lim as a coyote-nurturing saloonkeeper. Then there's Randy Danson as the town prude; Omar Metwally as both a mysterious stranger and his famous father; and Gibson Frazier as the death-weary local doctor.

Whether speaking in the language of vintage oaters, political double talk or current self-help books; manipulating puppets against open-sky backdrops; or singing in the style of Gene Autry in the saddle, they're all wonderfully earnest. While the show has its expected share of scatological jokes and schoolboy humor, there's none of the wink-wink self-consciousness common to downtown campfests or Zucker brothers movies.

Ms. Silverman and her cast find an amiable gentleness that matches Mr. Lipton's low-key absurdism, which makes everything all the funnier. "Tumacho" is the platonic theatrical version of the artfully anarchic, shrewdly mindless comedies we wait for every summer to hit movie theaters, often in vain. In other words, there's no need to hold out for the rebooted "Ghostbusters" for as long as "Tumacho" is in town.

The New York Times

Review: Pun Like an Egyptian Comic Strip in ‘The Tomb of King Tot’

By BEN BRANTLEY / June 21, 2016 / NY Times Critics’ Pick

Confining life to four pen-and-ink panels won’t keep the demons at bay. The three-dimensional world has a willful way of creeping into and subverting the two-dimensional comic strip at the center of “The Tomb of King Tot,” the sweet and spiky new tragicomedy by Olivia Dufault, which opened on Tuesday night at the Wild Project as part of Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks festival.

The same invasive process could be said to be the ruling dynamic of this latest offering from the inventive author of “Year of the Rooster,” the 2013 cult hit presented from the perspective of a jittery bird bred for cockfighting. As directed by Portia Krieger, with sets by Carolyn Mraz, “King Tot” the play is often hard to distinguish from the comic strip of the same name, which is penned by an insular and obsessive New Englander named Jane Haley (Annie McNamara).

Ms. Dufault’s characters, like those drawn by Jane, at first come across as paper-thin and too precious by half, summoned into existence for the sake of punch lines that usually take the form of seriously lame puns. These seeming stick figures provide an instant, Cap’n-Crunch-flavored nostalgia rush for those who grew up devouring the funny pages along with their cereal every morning and now feed their addiction as grown-ups by watching Adult Swim and “The Simpsons.”

Like such animated television fare, “King Tot” exists in a precisely regulated, self-contained universe, with its own laws of physics, geography and anatomy. The five pitch-perfect cast members assembled here often suggest how Homer and Marge, or the fretful souls of a Roz Chast illustration, might function if they were translated into flesh and blood.

This is true, even — and especially — of Ms. McNamara’s bendy-bodied, bespectacled Jane, whose expressions and postures exude the effect of deft, single-stroke line drawings of antic attitudes frozen in midgesture. At times, she seems far less fluid than her beloved fictional creations, King Tot (Bianca Crudo), a tantrum-prone 9-year-old ruler of ancient Egypt, and his long-suffering and devoted slave, Horemheb (Nick Choksi).

It is these two who open the play, moving among the three comic-striplike windows that form the back of Ms. Mraz’s rendering of Jane’s living room. They have jointed puppet bodies (Tilly Grimes did the costumes) and converse in dialogue that is typically an elaborate, shaggy-sphinx setup for the thudding joke of the final frame.

Those jokes are truly terrible. (Example: Tot tells Horemheb he would like a new set of shoes to be made from the bodies of slaves. What would they be called? “Mandals.”) But they are sources of endless delight to Jane, who is first discovered rolling with merriment — in the aisle of the theater — as she admires what she hath wrought.

You don’t have to look far for Jane’s immediate sources of inspiration. The same performers step out of the frame to morph into the other residents of Jane’s home. Ms. Crudo doubles as Jane’s perverse, demanding 16-year-old daughter, Atlanta — who gets her thrills from the toxicity of the permanent markers she uses to adorn her body — while Mr. Choksi rematerializes as Porter, Jane’s too-obliging doormat of a partner.



Nick Choksi and Bianca Crudo of “The Tomb of King Tot” at the Wild Project. Photo by Tina Fineberg for the New York Times.

True to her artistic breed, Jane spends more time with her imaginary family than her real one, especially once she receives a letter announcing she is a finalist for the coveted Chuckling Willow, “the single most important award for cartoonists in all of Eastern New England.” It is given by the venerable Lionel Feather (Brad Bellamy), “the laugh master of New Hampshire!,” and puts Jane in direct competition with her devious frenemy, Kissy Candida (Carmen M. Herlihy).

So far, so cute, right? Or as Kissy, who drops in on Jane unexpectedly, squeals in pleasure: “Oh my gosh, oh my gosh. So much whimsy!”

But whimsy, it turns out, comes in black as well as brighter hues. Soon the shadow of darkest tragedy falls over Jane’s world. (It assumes the physical form of spilled ink.) Ms. Mraz, who is great at finding visual equivalents for Jane’s assorted fancies, comes through big time here.

Jane responds by digging ever deeper into her work and ignoring the solemn social duties that life has thrust upon her. “The Tomb of King Tot” is no longer the lighthearted strip it once was, though. Its tone becomes increasingly morbid, and imagery from the Egyptian Book of the Dead starts to play a significant role.

Animating an artist’s work to mirror her (or his) life is by no means uncommon in theater. (The Tony-winning musical “Fun Home,” adapted from Alison Bechdel’s graphic novel, comes to mind.) Ms. Dufault’s variation on the theme, however, is strikingly bold and assured. The sensibility that shapes both her play and Jane’s comic strip are pretty much identical.

Even this work’s signal tragic event is drawn with the fey, absurdist details of comic-book ontology. A naked corpse, for instance, is discovered wearing Tweety Bird socks, and a truck at the scene of the crime is festooned with a sticker showing a Celtics mascot urinating on the Statue of Liberty.

Such descriptions may cause you to echo, less gleefully, Kissy’s cry about “so much whimsy.” But this production makes a case for whimsy as a filter both for shutting out and eventually coming to terms with an unforgiving world and one’s unforgivable self.

All religions that allow people to press on through this old vale of tears are ultimately personal. “King Tot” suggests that packaging such beliefs in a dopey comic strip doesn’t make them any less useful, improbable or profound.

Theater review: Summerworks Festival 2016's Every Angel Is Brutal

By Helen Shaw | June 1, 2016



Photograph: Elke Young

Are you having trouble waiting for the new *Ghostbusters* movie? Are you hoping Black Widow gets her standalone movie? Do you wish they'd just reboot *Alias* already? Then you share my bottomless appetite for women kicking ass. My advice? Hie thee to the first installment in the [Clubbed Thumb Summerworks festival](#), *Every Angel Is Brutal*. It's not just that Julia Jarcho (*Grimly Handsome*) is one of our more compelling playwrights; it's that *Angel* mashes up all the action-lady tropes of pop culture objects like *La Femme Nikita* and (of course) the play's titular inspiration, *Charlie's Angels*, and then imports the whole shebang into downtown experimental theater. That, naturally, is where it gets *really* weird.

There's a lot happening in *Angel*, including Pete Simpson as a slimy "Charlie" type who sends his saucy fighting trio (Amelia Workman, Jenny Seastone and Jiehae Park) into shoot-'em-up mayhem in Berlin. In true pulp fashion, Jarcho and director Knud Adams are in thrall to their cinematic inspirations, and there are enough training montages (à la *Nikita*) set to pulsing German pop (à la *Run Lola Run*) to content the fiercest heart. But Jarcho's looking at the girl-fighter archetype with a cynical eye. What kind of vicarious masochism (or sadism) is it that makes us want to watch women fight? Is a fantasy about women who can take a punch really that empowering? In her increasingly troubling thriller, Jarcho lets the genre fun go sour. One character undergoes such shocking torture that she turns into something that's half-vulture, half-Valkyrie. Jarcho's thriller-com winds up asking whether all that violence has transformed the audience, too. —*Helen Shaw*

The New York Times



Review: 'Men on Boats' Blurs Genders in Recalling John Wesley Powell's Expedition

By Ben Brantley / June 23, 2015 / NY Times Critics' Pick (edited for length)

Reposted August 1, 2016

If summer has you hankering for fitness-testing excursions through the dangerous outdoors, you will surely want to spend time with the hearty title characters of “Men on Boats,” who are churning up bright clouds of testosterone hovering over the Wild Project in the East Village.

The inhabitants of this rollicking history pageant by Jaclyn Backhaus, which opened on Monday night as the final offering of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks festival of new plays, are fellows who are always up for shooting the rapids, the breeze and edible wildlife. They hail from the United States of the mid-19th century, when assertive, unquestioning masculinity was something that stood tall and unchallenged.

Oh, and just so you know, there isn't a man in the 10-member cast of “Men on Boats,” at least not according to the strict anatomical definition. On the other hand, as we have plenty of reason to think these days, gender can be as much matter of perception as of chromosomes. ...

But “Men on Boats” is no antic drag show, though it definitely has its antic side. Nor is it a work of sexual politics, in any obvious sense. Ms. Backhaus's lively script and Will Davis's highly ingenious direction leave no room for nudging references to any gender gap between cast and characters. ...

“Men on Boats” starts from the realization that we can never recreate exactly how it was. This play's perspective is that of a contemporary reader filtering accounts of another age through her own latter-day sensibility. (It's not unlike what Lin-Manuel Miranda is doing in his splendid hip-hop musical, “Hamilton,” which opens on Broadway in August.)

That women — embodying 19th-century mores while speaking in a 21st-century vernacular — are portraying men here weaves this point of view into the very fabric of the performance. And I have the feeling that it may be easier for them than it would be for male actors to grasp the artificial constructs of masculinity from Powell's time. (For the record, not all the ensemble members identify as belonging to a single gender; so excuse any hedging use of pronouns.) Not that you'll be thinking in such meta-theatrical terms while you're watching “Men on Boats,” once you've grown accustomed to its style. The tone is comic, but never cute or camp. And ultimately, you feel, the play respects its bold if fallible pioneers, in all their natural bravery and fearfulness.

The story stays close to “The Exploration of the Colorado River and Its Canyons,” Powell's published record of the historic journey he organized for the United States government. We follow Powell (a crisp Kelly McAndrew), a stately one-armed army major, and his expedition crew as they wend their way through perilous waters to create the first official map of the region. ...

How this occurs is brought to infectiously vivid life ... the cast, the director and the design team — which includes Arnulfo Maldonado (sets), Ásta Bennie Hostetter (costumes), Solomon Weisbard (lighting) and Jane Shaw (whose sound design makes room for sweeping cinematic epic music) — delightfully recreate the rhythms, rush and terror of life on the water. This is achieved with four portable prowes (standing in for full-bodied boats), some rope and wittily synchronized body movements.

And then there are the men themselves, rendered in a carefully exaggerated style that both teases and cozies up to the clichés of the archetypal hero adventurer. They include the officious Dunn (Kristen Sieh), who not so secretly feels he should be the team leader; Sumner (a marvelously forthright Donnetta Lavinia Grays), a Civil War veteran who dreams of finding a tree to climb and sleep in for days; and Old Shady (Jess Barbagallo, hilarious in a Walter Brennan-esque performance), Powell's slightly simple-minded brother.

The cast is rounded out by Becca Blackwell, Hannah Cabell, Danielle Davenport, Danaya Esperanza, Birgit Huppuch and Layla Khoshnoudi, and they're all good company. And while the stage they inhabit is as small as most studio apartments, they are improbably able to make us believe they are indeed roaming wide-open spaces where it's all too easy for a man, of any persuasion, to get lost forever.

See the full review at nytimes.com/2015/06/24/theater/review-men-on-boats-blurs-genders-in-recalling-john-wesley-powells-expedition.html

‘Men on Boats’ Is Smooth Sailing

by [MIRIAM FELTON-DANSKY](#) / AUGUST 2, 2016



The very best thing about *Men on Boats*, and there are many contenders for this title, is watching an ensemble of stellar female performers traverse the tricky terrain of American westward expansion — all while cheerfully hoisting the bows of makeshift watercraft around their waists. Jaclyn Backhaus’s riff on the dude culture of nineteenth-century exploration, which premiered at Clubbed Thumb’s 2015 Summerworks festival, is now at Playwrights Horizons, in a revival directed by Will Davis. It’s a smart, funny, poignant meditation on gender and historical memory, speaking as convincingly to our own time as any drama set in the present day.

Men on Boats takes inspiration from John Wesley Powell’s 1869 expedition down the Colorado River, a landmark effort in mapping the American Southwest and the first successful passage of white Americans through the Grand Canyon. Powell’s crew endured ship-smashing rapids, gnawing hunger, encounters with rattlesnakes, and disappointing defections from within their ranks. Eventually, on the brink of starvation, the straggling survivors euphorically exited the canyon and entered history.

Ten women inhabit the roles of Powell and his crew, bluffing and blustering their way through physical danger and tense disputes. Using choral speech and exaggerated choreography, the cast navigates a bare stage, surrounded by images of craggy Western landscapes. They loudly christen rocky outcroppings with their own names — and, just as loudly, question one another’s survival skills and common sense. Powell (Kelly McAndrew) insists that the group’s ships can weather the waterfalls ahead and that their provisions will last; Dunn (Kristen Sieh) aggressively challenges Powell’s authority. Fellow travelers — Hawkins (Jocelyn Bioh) and the gruff, understated show-stealer, Sumner (Donnetta Lavinia Grays) — attempt to soothe egos and push ahead.

The distance between those macho white explorers and the racially diverse group of women playing them turns the performance into a study in learned male behaviors. It’s hilarious, but also pointed, as Backhaus shows us the link between the pressures of white masculinity and the drive for territorial conquest. And, even if an accident of timing, it’s especially poignant to watch women revel in this classically American saga at a time when the first woman in U.S. history just accepted a major party’s presidential nomination — invoking the question of how our national drama might have been different with more women in charge.

Or with more women telling the story: In a poetic final scene, Backhaus widens the narrative lens, suggesting that all histories — heroic or merely self-aggrandizing — belong, ultimately, not to the doers but to the tellers. (That is: to us.)

Theater review: Men on Boats

By David Cote | August 1, 2016 | **FOUR STARS!**



Bad-history plays are a thing now. By “bad” I don’t mean poorly researched, but ones incongruously reframed for comic or deconstructive effect (*Drunk History*, but arty). Out with period fidelity and realism (itself a fiction), in with **hip-hop Founding Fathers** or, in *Men on Boats*, a 10-man expeditionary team played by women. (In a similar vein, Lucas Hnath went **emo** on young Isaac Newton and Little Lord lampooned colonial pageantry in *Pocahontas and/or America*). To recount the perilous 1869

Powell ride down the Colorado River through the Grand Canyon, playwright Jaclyn Backhaus gender-flips her hardy crew and asks director Will Davis to stage the impossible: vessels barreling over waterfalls and hairsbreadth escapes from drowning. Silly? Sure. Thrilling? Oh, yes.

Davis and his actors convey the epic, arduous journey through rigorously choreographed gestures and movement, accompanied by Backhaus's poetic, terse script (Sample exchange: “Swell. Swell. Rocks?” “Almost through.” “And hold. Hold keep left.”) Actors suspend kid-size boat frames at waist level, as our intrepid explorers face down deadly currents and protect their provisions. Although Backhaus’s sly inventory of male weakness (empty swagger, imperialist land-lust, concealed cowardice, self-mythologizing) can grow repetitious after an hour or so, the cast is a dream team of experimental pros and fresh faces, mining the pathos and genuine heroism of the story.

Originally presented by the path-blazing Clubbed Thumb last summer and now co-produced by it and Playwrights Horizons, the return engagement of *Men on Boats* has simply the best acting ensemble Off Broadway right now: Hannah Cabell, Danielle Davenport, Danaya Esperanza, Donnetta Lavinia Grays, Birgit Huppuch, Layla Khoshnoudi, Kelly McAndrew, Kristen Sieh, Jocelyn Bioh, Elizabeth Kenny. Learn the names; they will be remembered for generations to come. —*David Cote*

Playwrights Horizons (Off Broadway). By Jaclyn Backhaus. Directed by Will Davis. With ensemble cast. Running time: 1hr 40mins. No intermission. Through Aug 14. Click [here](#) for full venue and ticket information.

<https://www.timeout.com/newyork/blog/theater-review-men-on-boats-at-playwrights-horizons-122116>