

Roadkill Confidential

Clubbed Thumb at 3LD Art & Technology Center

Reviewed by David Sheward

SEPTEMBER 16, 2010



Photo by Carl Skutsch

If you think theater should be scary, exciting, and insightful, truck downtown to the 3LD Art & Technology Center in the financial district for Sheila Callaghan's hip and freaky "Roadkill Confidential." Presented by the Obie-winning theater company **Clubbed Thumb**, this "noirish meditation on brutality" takes an unforgiving look at several disturbing trends in modern America: lust for fame, paranoia fueled by terrorism, and indifference to violence, to name a few.

Directed with music-video intensity by Kip Fagan, the production incorporates multimedia effects and an imaginative art-installation set by Peter Ksander.

Callaghan stops just short of comedy-sketch excess. Her story line is just crazy enough to be plausible. The borderline-satiric plot could be ripped from this morning's newspaper. Edgy artist Trevor is out to top her breakthrough show, a series of lurid photographs of a real automobile accident featuring grisly close-ups of the victim. Her latest work incorporates dead animals that she deliberately ran over on the back roads near her upstate New York studio. When the animals begin transmitting fatal diseases, the FBI is called in, and a spooky agent with hypnotic powers stalks her. But Trevor isn't ceding control of her art or her life so quickly. The power struggle between Trevor and the FBI man forms the core of the action and, as played by the spiky-sharp Rebecca Henderson and Danny Mastrogiorgio, their delicate dance for dominance is fascinating to watch. In a revealing subplot, Trevor's husband, a pompous art historian, and stepson, a punk teenager with a fetish for forks, are so addicted to her notoriety that they are willing to sacrifice their mental and physical health to share her spotlight.

Henderson perfectly captures Trevor's narcissistic drive to put her creative impulses above the needs of everyone around her, yet she also gives the character a much needed soft spot. Mastrogiorgio goes beyond caricature as the mysterious operative. He could have allowed this dark overachiever to become a parody of an action hero, but he shades the cartoonish aspects with subtle limning. Greg McFadden is appropriately craven as William, Trevor's sycophantic hubby, and Alex Anfanger endows Randy, the rebellious adolescent, with a scary energy. Polly Lee draws laughs as an overly perky neighbor.

Roadkill Confidential

Reviewed By: **Andy Propst** · Sep 12, 2010 · New York

Sheila Callaghan metaphorically pits the arts against the federal government in her theatrical noir *Roadkill Confidential*, which Clubbed Thumb is presenting at 3LD. While the piece, which Kip Fagan has directed with flair, initially proves laugh-inspiring and thought-provoking, it ultimately runs out of steam before final curtain.

Trevor (Rebecca Henderson), a visual artist whose work aims to shock its viewers, really could never expect that her latest creation -- which incorporates the crushed remains of animals that she's run over with her car in upstate New York --- could put her in the sites of the FBI. But, after a college student (Alex Anfanger) she's been having an extramarital affair with dies from touching one of the critters, infected with a highly contagious bacterial disease that's often used in biological warfare, she finds herself in the sites of a guy known simply as FBI Man (Danny Mastrogiorgio).

In true noir fashion, the pursuer -- the ultra-patriotic, well-meaning, but not terribly bright fed -- finds himself pursued as he becomes increasingly fascinated with his brooding, yet volcanic, prey. He watches her from the tiny video camera he secretes inside her home with increasing regularity, hoping to not only gain the evidence he needs to nab her, but also to understand the woman and the artist as well as the world in which she lives.

Beyond the killer "Bunny disease," Callaghan's play is filled with some terrific (and surreal) flights of fancy. FBI Man sports a patch to cover the eye socket that was left empty after he was tortured on a mission. There's nothing unusual in that. But, when he lifts the small oval of black fabric, whomever he is speaking with is compelled to reveal their innermost thoughts and desires. Ultimately, the conceit provides Callaghan with an intriguing way of dealing with exposition throughout.

She is equally cunning in the ways in which she satirizes aspects of our world today through her portraits of the people surrounding Trevor, notably her art history professor husband William (played with breezy dorkiness by Greg McFadden), who revels in his wife's (and others') avant garde work. Similarly, as Trevor's stepson Randy (imbued with peripatetic edginess by Anfanger) searches for fame through the YouTube videos he posts and the inane television commercials for which he auditions, Callaghan skewers our current mania for achieving quick celebrity.

It's all incredibly thoughtful, and there are moments when the play, which unfolds within the confines of a sterile diorama bordered by tiny TVs overhead (scenic design by Peter Ksander), proves truly amusing. The difficulty is that Callaghan's balance of noir, parody and satire is terribly uneven, and Fagan's production never manages to unite the play's varied tones.

What pulls audiences through are Mastrogiorgio's and Henderson's spot-on performances, which beautifully navigate the play's dichotomous threads of comedy and drama and prove consistently engaging.



Polly Lee, Danny Mastrogiorgio, Greg McFadden and Rebecca Henderson in *Roadkill Confidential*
(© Carl Skutsch)

The G-Man Always Rings Twice

by Benjamin Sutton

"I'm a divining rod for the morally bankrupt," the FBI man tells us as he gives his psychological self-portrait. Later, undercover at a fried chicken commercial audition, he yells: "I'm a nugget, homes!" Both hilarious proclamations are accurate. This nameless agent assembled from classic noir anti-heroes, shot through with middle management inconspicuousness, dressed in grey flannel and only distinguished by his super-powered eyepatch, oversees every detail in [Clubbed Thumb](#)'s premiere production of

[Sheila Callaghan](#)'s latest, *Roadkill Confidential* (at [3LD](#) through September 28). He doubles as a director-within-the play for director Kip Fagan, who juggles the elaborate text superbly. Danny Mastrogiorgio goes all out as the almost campy detective, humanizing hilarious hard-boiled lines like "I'm a block of clay-shaped clay" and "Who is Trevor, you ask? She might have been my greatest triumph. But she was my demise, so to speak."



(photo credit: Carl Skutsch)

A cruelly blunt and emotionally frayed young artist working on a follow-up to her gruesome Whitney debut, Trevor (Rebecca Henderson) seems a perfectly-matched eccentric to the agent's proud ordinariness. Her project to create a sculptural installation out of roadkill, which we watch her collect during swerving nighttime drives that evoke the opening credits of *Lost Highway*, takes on an even darker dimension when the animals she assembles turn out to be infected with a highly contagious disease that's deadly to humans ("The disease is called tularemia—"Rabbit disease," a whimpering doctor informs us). The project's potential use for biological warfare brings the agent—it's never made clear on behalf of whom, though the script says "FBI man" and it's "a matter of national fucking security"—to the upstate New York town where Trevor lives with her Modern art historian husband William (Greg McFadden), celebrity-starved stepson Randy (Alex Anfanger) and nosy divorcée neighbor Melanie (the hilarious Polly Lee, almost stealing the show). Callaghan's targets in *Roadkill* appear twofold: the solipsistic art world star system, and the surveillance society of Homeland Security-era America.

The two figureheads for each system speak to each other mainly through a dust-sized surveillance device the agent plants in Trevor's houseplant. Her confessions to this camera, relayed via almost a dozen screens pointed out at the audience as part of scenic designer [Peter Ksander](#)'s superb, multimedia-laden set, double as video diary. Trevor explains the goal of her project: to confront viewers with the casual violence of contemporary life that we accept numbly while watching "those channels." The agent, talking back to her image as if the tiny device were an intercom, fears more nefarious plans. Already two people have died from contact with infected animals, and the hilarious newscaster on intermittent wall-sized broadcasts cautions in Callaghan's darkly funny, list-prone deadpan style: "No need to panic, Berkshire residents. But please stay out of the woods. And away from the squirrels. And do not touch your pets without gloves. And do not go hiking. Or fishing. Or swimming. Or hunting. Or birding. Or leaf-peeping. And do not play outdoor sports. And do not mow your lawn. Or trim your bushes. Or garden. Or weed-whack. Or rake. Or hoe. Until further notice." Around this time, panic becomes the characters' default mode.

The difficulty in *Roadkill*, and Callaghan's work in general, involves balancing the *Onion*-caliber sarcasm of such moments and the ironic deployment of stock characters and situations, with the seemingly earnest critiques couched within. Here, weirdly, it's the added mediation of live video feeds and wall-sized projections that cuts through the distancing comedy. The strange disjuncture of watching Henderson, her back to the audience, head in the houseplant, and face in close-up on the monitors, amplifies Trevor's most intimate and unguarded moments—she tells the agent: "And then I think...maybe it isn't a crime to make oneself numb to that kind of extremity...And that's the exact moment I want to kill myself." It also further unsettles the agent's moral position (and, by extension, our own) with regards to her increasingly deadly piece—as in Adam Rapp's *The Metal Children*, the artwork within the play becomes as interesting as the play itself. The final reveal, for us and the cameras from those same channels, provides a horrifyingly beautiful closing tableau, a fleshy, festering exclamation point on the sparsely designed show's clinical cool. Full of righteous certainties and conflicting convictions, *Roadkill Confidential* ends with triumphant, gripping ambivalence. It's a chase into the digitally distorted psyche of a society at once overly sensitive and totally desensitized.



Theater Review (NYC): *Roadkill Confidential*

Author: [Jon Sobel](#) — Published: [Sep 12, 2010 at 6:13 am](#)

Towards the end of Sheila Callaghan's intriguing new play, controversial artist Trevor Pratt (Rebecca Henderson) opens her mouth to speak—but all that comes out are the sounds of TV news reports from war zones. It's an emblematic moment in this tense comedy-drama about the blurred line between media and message, art and life.

Our narrator is an FBI agent (a droll Danny Mastrogio) as flamboyant in his metaphors as he is cocksure of his investigative abilities. He's been sent to find out whether Trevor's activities at her rural studio go beyond the merely disgusting (collecting roadkill and incorporating it into art installations) to include something more sinister. During scenes of Trevor's domestic life, we are led to wonder: will something awful happen to her incredibly annoying and nosy neighbor Melanie (the even funnier Polly Lee)?

Though not actually omniscient, the agent approximates all-knowingness by planting hidden cameras in the house Trevor shares with pedantic art professor William (Greg McFadden) and William's comically rebellious teenage son Randy (Alex Anfanger), who has an obsession with forks. Trevor quickly discovers the bug, but instead of disabling it she begins to confide through it to the unknown agent.

Because you see, Trevor is the stereotypical tortured and misunderstood artist, unable to satisfyingly connect with her lover or anyone else. In real life such people tend to be tiresome, but Trevor—though like everyone else here a very consciously *written character*—is written and played so well that she's unceasingly interesting to watch, whether squirming silently in front of the war-blasting TV, politely seething during one of Melanie's uninvited visits, or monologuing to the camera so that her face appears in creepy, giant video closeup. Projection is used smartly and integrally throughout the production.



Callaghan pokes as much fun at William's overly intellectualized analyses of art as she does of Randy's loud, empty rebellions and lonely Melanie's vapid desperation, but Trevor herself gets off easy, partly because Henderson, in a bravura performance, makes her real and sympathetic despite her twisted actions. William explains her appeal. He'd been recently, violently widowed, and when Trevor "reaches into the wreckage to touch him...she's the blade, you see / the blade feels nothing / it only cuts...I realized I could never butter toast again / I could only be cut." Yet tragically, Trevor doesn't want to be that cold blade. She lashes out precisely because she's raging against the numbness that creeps over her as she watches more and more war footage. "And then I'm just like everyone else out there / The non-feelers / The ones who pass a starving dog / And keep on walking." How could this possibly end well?

Kudos must also go to director Kip Fagan, whose overall vision keeps this talky piece moving smoothly, and to the technical and artistic mastery of Bart Fasbender (sound), Jeanette Oi-Suk Yew (lighting), and Shaun Irons and Lauren Petty (video). They make excellent use of the crisp white space of the 3LD Art & Technology Center, way downtown near Ground Zero. Seeing *Roadkill Confidential*, especially here, was an apt way to spend the evening of September 11.

For schedule and tickets visit the [Clubbed Thumb website](#).

Photo: Rebecca Henderson as Trevor and Danny Mastrogiorgio as FBI Man. Photo by Carl Skutsch.

STAGE VOICES

September 14, 2010

SHEILA CALLAGHAN: 'ROADKILL CONFIDENTIAL' (REVIEW)

© 2010 by Bob Shuman

Sheila Callaghan gets the current zeitgeist in New York right. Her new play, *Roadkill Confidential*, now playing at 3 LD Technology Center and directed by Kip Fagan, scavenges from the rubble heaps of noir iconology, Hitchcock, De Palma, Bergman, maybe even Tina Howe's *Museum* (recall the bizarre, unseen artist Agnes Vaag in that play scouring the underbrush of the woods to slurp the marrow of animal skeletons). No mere copyist, though, Callaghan has a vision that is clear, individual, and hard as the marble her leading character, Trevor (Rebecca Henderson), claims as artistic capital. This is a smart writer unafraid of blood, someone a gore-fest director like George A. Romero, also interested in societal commentary from behind a horror façade, could have used (if he ever had a budget). In a monologue from Callaghan's play *Tumor*, a young woman dreams of blood gushing from between her legs after having a Slurpie spilled on her in Macy's; in *Roadkill Confidential* blood reminds us of the bucket in *Carrie*.

Having written for Showtime and been highlighted in the *New Yorker*, Callaghan is part of 13P, Obie-winning writers who snubbed their noses at the way theatre companies gave lip service to but *didn't* produce their plays. She's also unafraid of offending the dramaturg—Callaghan's lead—an artist provocateur—doesn't change much during the course of *Roadkill Confidential* and is unlikeable (mean, thoughtless, self-absorbed). Callaghan doesn't even mind bulldozing over the secondary characters (Polly Lee survives the onslaught artistically in a thankless role that, in a previous time, would have gone to Sandy Dennis). In the sticks and secondary routes of the seemingly effortless, jerry-rigged plot of *Roadkill Confidential*, the imperative inflation of one's own work trumps morality—the play comes across as a nightmare induced from drinking too many Starbucks cappuccinos before bedtime. Forget thinking the artist would implicate herself in a procedural regarding the death of a student (with her own meat combines at stake); for that matter, forget assuming an investigator would directly ask her any questions as to her involvement. With the play's passive components heightened to the level of the importance of our current wars, which flash before us on monitors at the start of the play, we wonder if anybody thinks of becoming an ordinary, work-a-day artist these days, as if celebrity—much less immortality—must be part of the definition.

Andy Warhol once told us that everyone would be famous for fifteen minutes; Callaghan's posse wants longer, alone, and all at the same time.

I happened to attend the play with a friend I'd worked with on several jobs. She had just given notice at her current publishing gig. Burned out, totally stressed, she saw no room for growth within the company, had been placed into some kind of caste system where people in her department were told not to communicate with those in another, "more important," area; employees were not being replaced, which only added to the already heavy workload; and the competition and backstabbing was getting worse, with the prospect of even more layoffs: In a New York that wasn't fun anymore, with narcissism and desperation heightening in the rats remaining on board, she decided that checking out for Houston sounded just fine.

In *Roadkill Confidential*, Sheila Callaghan catches our era's lack of apology; as unappealing as that might seem to some. To her, "If it moves you, you should touch it." Actually, this is novel, given so many playwrights who refer to earlier eras in their work, who would rather be in the off-Broadway glory days of the '60s, '70s, and early '80s (not only working during those years, but thinking about issues with the sensibilities in which they were thought about then, too). Callaghan, however, doesn't seem interested in any history other than what's playing out right now—even if it does mean reflecting what's caught in the headlights.



Roadkill Confidential

September 16, 2010 in [Reviews](#) | Tags: [Theater](#), [Borough Culture](#), [Roadkill Confidential](#), [Sheila Callaghan](#), [Kip Fagan](#), [Rebecca Henderson](#), [Danny Mastrogiorgio](#), [Alex Anfanger](#), [Polly Lee](#), [Greg McFadden](#) | by [Bonny Prince Billy](#)

On a darkened highway in upstate New York a cute, fuzzy bunny is transfixed by the glare of headlights and the roar of an internal combustion engine. The poor rabbit's eyes widen in horror, and his lip quivers uncontrollably as the car swerves. The innocent lapine wanderer is struck hard by two tons of steel and rubber, but it's only a glancing blow; and though his back legs are crushed, his heart, still hammering with fear, has survived. The car screeches to a halt, and a woman gets out. She's pale and trembling like the rabbit. She picks him up gingerly, and tells him it's going to be alright. She wraps him in a towel, puts him in her car, and speeds off, into the night.

Roadkill Confidential by Sheila Callaghan, is a play about art and guilt. Trevor, the main character, is a woman who gained early and widespread fame ten years ago when she created a photography show that displayed gruesome pictures of woman who was killed in a car crash. But in the art world *Faces of Death* is so 80s. Trevor's exhibit was a sensation because the dead woman was the wife of Trevor's new husband William, and William was Trevor's professor at art school. Now the son William had with his dead wife is a violent teen who loves ultra-violent video games and screaming instead of talking. You might think he blames Trevor for wrecking his life, but to the contrary, he wants his stepmother's new show to be an even bigger hit than the one that killed his mother. When he was six and he saw the images that made Trevor famous all he could do is cry. Now he wants to bask in the reflected glow of her spotlight.

To complicate this situation, a deadly bacteria has killed two people and a rabbit in the vicinity of Trevor's studio. The prokaryote microorganisms attract the attention of the Feds because this particular kind of beastie was not created by Mother Nature, but rather by Uncle Sam. That is, it's a weapons grade flora. It just so happens that our narrator — a man with an eye patch, gravelly voice, and palpable menace (played skillfully by Danny Mastrogiorgio) — is an FBI man on the trail of whoever is using this strain of government sponsored nastiness to undermine our national security.

The hard-boiled detective angle of the story is probably where the play gets its title. This narrative frame leads to some expected conclusions: for example, in the process of observing Trevor the FBI man realizes that, despite their positions on opposite ends of the political spectrum, he and she are kindred spirits. But Callaghan uses this potential cliché to explicate her core theme, which is the centerfuge of Sadistic Eros and shame that consumes those bent on Messianic fame — a dialectic that animates both the nihilistic artist and the faithful patriot. On one hand you have Trevor, who is willing to torture animals to make a point about the inhumanity of torturing animals, and the FBI man, on the other, who is willing to destroy the principles of the state in order to preserve it. In the final analysis, Ms. Callaghan's portrayal of this essentially human paradox is well done, and the ending, though not unexpected, is tragic and satisfying.

Kip Fagan's direction and staging accentuate Ms. Callaghan's point, leading to the final, nauseating revelation of Trevor and the FBI man's depravity. And the huge, industrial space is used to maximum effect by the team of designers who have created a visually striking setting that enhances both the story and the aesthetic pleasure of the audience.

The play and this production can leave one with the vertiginous feeling that all art is voyeurism, and all patriotism is the final refuge of scoundrels; and that, consequently, the Puritan Parliament was right to suppress the London theaters in the 1640s and 50s. Isn't edgy drama just an excuse to enjoy someone else's pain? If you don't believe me, ask [Plato](#).

Until September 27.