

# The New York Times

## Review: ‘D Deb Debbie Deborah,’ a Dizzying Subversion of Identity

By BEN BRANTLEY / May 26, 2015 / NY Times Critics’ Pick

Have they come up with a name yet for the fear of identity theft? Egokleptophobia, maybe? Whatever you want to call this topical neurosis, it throbs like an insistent bass line in “D Deb Debbie Deborah,” Jerry Liebling’s dizzily clever new play about mutating selfhood.



The subject of this comedy of anxiety, the auspicious opening production of Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks series at the Wild Project in the East Village, isn’t exactly like that of those alarmist television commercials about Internet predators who make merry with your credit cards. True, the title character, a fledgling artist in a big city, has her phone, wallet and computer stolen in the opening scene.

But what really disturbs this young woman — let’s call her Deb, and say she’s portrayed by Brooke Bloom — is that she had buzzed the thief into her apartment because she had assumed

(after a garbled intercom conversation) that this person was her friend Lizzie. Even worse, when she talked to the police afterward, she couldn’t describe the intruder who had held her at knifepoint.

“Maybe this woman didn’t exist,” Deb says to her boyfriend, Karl. Such speculation leads her to a sobering corollary: What if it turns out that “somebody just dreamed me up, and that one day they’ll just wake up and I’ll be gone like they just imagined me?”

As metaphysical conjectures go, this does not perhaps rank with Hegel or Wittgenstein. It sounds like the kind of blow-your-mind thesis a teenager might come up with after too much weed and too little sleep. But it turns out to be a fine taking-off point for a 75-minute exercise that subverts our faith in fixed identities through simple but sly theatrical devices.

Directed with deceptively easygoing agility by Lee Sunday Evans, “D Deb Debbie Deborah” features five cast members — Kate Benson, Nick Choksi, Geoff Sobelle and Stacey Yen as well as Ms. Bloom — who melt and morph before our eyes with a splendidly assured lack of assurance. I can’t tell you who plays which character, for reasons too obvious and too complicated to go into.

But the bewilderment in which “D” traffics is presented with a sustained lucidity as beguiling as it is exasperating. Like Deb, you will probably not be sure who is onstage at any given moment. Yet Mr. Liebling’s dramatic intentions are always clear. And every element in the production feeds and particularizes this confused clarity. Or clear confusion.

Hmm, I seem to be thinking like Deb. Then again, I’m a New Yorker. And though the geographical location of “D” is not specified, it could take place only in an overcrowded urban environment where faces and forms start to feel interchangeable.

Take the play’s feverish high point, which occurs during a gallery opening for early work by Mark, the painter for whom Deb has just been hired as an assistant. (Her job is repeatedly replicating a signature —not Mark’s, not her own, but that of someone named Veronica Schuster.)

If you’ve ever attended such an event, you’ve overheard conversations like these, in which people keep introducing and reintroducing themselves to one another, asking, “Now, what was your name again?” The talk

also tends toward breezy but increasingly muddy observations of how the work on view doesn't really seem typical of the Mark they know.

The show's cast of five divides and multiplies into a densely populated, horizontal Tower of Babel. (One choice example of their chatter: "Deb is Mark's assistant." "That's fantastic. Wow, so you painted these?")

Listen to enough of this palaver and you'll develop a case of existential wooziness that brings to mind James Stewart in full panic mode in "Vertigo." No wonder that Mark faints and has to be carried out on a stretcher. Or so the gossip has it.

The implicit satire may have the ring of the Chelsea art-gallery scene. But the preoccupations that trouble Deb are universal, extending even to our fears of the loss of what defines us when we die. (A character in a coma also figures in the plot.)

None of this been-there, thought-that angst would amount to much, at least in terms of an evening's energizing entertainment, if it weren't translated into such invigorating stagecraft. The ensemble members clearly love inhabiting what is an actor's paradise, in which questions of who's playing whom become as giddy as a "Who's on first?" routine.

Even Brett J. Banakis's white-walled, anonymous set makes a perfect contribution to the show's pristinely organized chaos. Those walls stop short of the floor, allowing us glimpses of feet before the performers make their entrances.

At first you'll feel confident that you can anticipate the bodies that will accompany these feet into view. You will lose such confidence very quickly.

#### **D Deb Debbie Deborah**

By Jerry Liebllich; directed by Lee Sunday Evans; sets by Brett J. Banakis; costumes by David Hyman; lighting by Eric Southern; sound by Brandon Wolcott; production stage manager, Kevin Clutz; production manager, Octavia Driscoll; technical director, Patrick Brennan. Presented by Clubbed Thumb Summerworks, Maria Striar, producing artistic director; Sarah McLellan, managing director; Michael Bulger, associate producer. At the Wild Project, 195 East Third Street, East Village; clubbedthumb.org. Through Saturday. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.

WITH: Kate Benson, Brooke Bloom, Nick Choksi, Geoff Sobelle and Stacey Yen.

# 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

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.

Long before Chastity Bono became a guy named Chaz and Bruce Jenner transformed into Caitlyn, stage performers were regularly changing their sexes, demonstrating the fluidness of the boundaries between male and female. Taboo-flouting drag shows have been a naughty staple of downtown New York theater for many a decade.

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.

Yet it’s hard to imagine this 90-minute account of a pioneering journey through virgin Western territory in 1869 being nearly as effective, or entertaining, with an ensemble of men. Based on the journals of John Wesley Powell, who led a geological expedition down the Green and Colorado Rivers into the (then) great unknown called the Grand Canyon, “Men on Boats” makes canny use of the obvious distance between performers and their roles to help bridge the distance between then and now.

You see, imagining life in another, distant time always requires a leap of faith. The past has its own language, customs and sense of the human place in the world. Whenever screen and stage artists try to summon what life must have been like long ago, we’re too often conscious of jarring inconsistencies, of the anachronisms that are allowed to slip in.

“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.

Along the way, they bond, scrap, joke, reminisce and argue about directions, rather like any group traveling together. The stakes, though, are mortal. Several of the team come close to death when boats capsize. Food rations and surveyor's instruments are lost to the river. The play begins with 10 men in four boats. By the end, that ratio is six to three.

How this occurs is brought to infectiously vivid life. You could even call "Men on Boats" an action play in the sense that the 1994 Meryl Streep vehicle, "The River Wild," was an action movie (well, sort of). The men, after all, spend most of their waking hours on the coursing rivers.

And 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 prows (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 coozies 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.

### **Men on Boats**

By Jacklyn Backhaus; directed by Will Davis; sets by Arnulfo Maldonado; costumes by Ásta Bennie Hostetter; lighting by Solomon Weisbard; sound by Jane Shaw; production stage manager, Sunny Stapleton. Presented by Clubbed Thumb Summerworks, Maria Striar, producing artistic director; Sarah McLellan, managing director; Michael Bulger, associate producer. At the Wild Project, 195 East Third Street, East Village; [clubbedthumb.org](http://clubbedthumb.org). Through Monday. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: Jess Barbagallo (Old Shady), Becca Blackwell (Hawkins), Hannah Cabell (OG), Danielle Davenport (Hall), Danaya Esperanza (Seneca), Donnetta Lavinia Grays (Sumner), Birgit Huppuch (Goodman), Layla Khoshnoudi (Bradley), Kelly McAndrew (Powell) and Kristen Sieh (Dunn).

# The New York Times

## Review: 'Card and Gift,' Set in a Seldom-Patronized Shop

By BEN BRANTLEY / June 7, 2015



From left, Connie Ray, Mia Katigbak and Ella Dershowitz in Kate E. Ryan's "Card and Gift."  
Credit: Tina Fineberg for The New York Times

Small-town blues were once a dominant melody line in American drama. Their sound was probably most pervasive during the mid-20th-century, when the tear-splotted plays of William Inge ruled Broadway.

But such works, set in small lonely pockets of a big, gregarious nation, have never entirely left us, even as the kind of parochial world they portray is fading into oblivion. And lately there seems to have been a resurgence of this wistful genre, in which an aimless United States finds its mirror in a host of rudderless characters in increasingly peripheral places.

Annie Baker, whose marvelous Pulitzer Prize-winning "The Flick" has been revived in Greenwich Village, is the style's current poet laureate. But you can find plenty of other contemporary examples, like Samuel D. Hunter and Lucy Thurber, who convey quiet desperation in the provinces with varied pitch and shadings.

Kate E. Ryan's "Card and Gift," which opened over the weekend at the Wild Project in the East Village, makes its own, self-effacingly oddball contribution to this mini-renaissance. Part of Clubbed Thumb's Summerworks series of new plays, this gentle, meandering comedy portrays three women marking time in a dying business in a dying New Hampshire town, in the midst of a presidential primary.

Directed with affectionate restraint by Ken Rus Schmoll, "Card and Gift" is set in a store that, as the title suggests, sells tchotchkes and animal figurines and snow globes that gather dust on understocked shelves. (Daniel Zimmerman's set radiates a stark, bleak coziness.) This unpromising enterprise has recently been taken over by Lila (Mia Katigbak), a middle-aged onetime artist who inherited it from her parents.

Though customers appear to be all but nonexistent, Lila has hired two employees — Annette (Connie Ray), who recently quit her job as a public-school teacher, and Shana (Ella Dershowitz), a recent college graduate who has come to town to take care of her dying uncle.

Lila, portrayed by Ms. Katigbak with persuasive sotto-voce weariness, has the dazed, depressive aspect of a long-sequestered animal now resigned to its captivity. Annette, who is married to the sturdy Mick (Scott Sowers), is relentlessly perky, even as she wonders why her grown son never seems to want her to come visit him. Shana, as befits a member of the attention-deficit generation, zigzags between hyper-animation and zonked-out fatigue, which allows Ms. Dershowitz to make a meal of the show's tastier lines. ("I majored in communications," Shana says. "If that's not vague, I don't know what is.")

Though of varied outlook and metabolism, these disparate women seem to share a suspicion that their lives may have reached a dead end. They squabble, comfort one another (or try to) and on occasion almost connect. Mostly, though, when they look at one another, they see their own loneliness.

When Annette hears about a new presidential candidate — a motherly former schoolteacher named Diana Boss who is running on a platform of love and cookies — she finds her *raison d'être* by joining the campaign. (We never meet Diana, who brings to mind a less combative, even vaguer Sarah Palin, but we hear her being interviewed.)

Diana doesn't register very credibly as either a figure of political satire or a form-giving force in Annette's life. Ms. Ryan, whose earlier works at Clubbed Thumb include "Dot" and "Design Your Kitchen," fares better with more subtle fantastical touches that help define these women's visions of a stunted future, moments when naturalism melts softly into surrealism.

The piquant presence of Laura Esterman, in two different roles, is invaluable in rendering such demi-fantasies. And there is one priceless scene, early in the play, that occurs in the blink of a sleepy eye. It happens when Shana briefly thinks she sees her two older workmates as the ancient crones they — and implicitly, she — might become if they never left Lila's store.

This sliver of a nightmare is achieved through nothing more than a lighting change (Les Dickert is the designer) and a shift in postures and movement by Ms. Katigbak and Ms. Ray. But Shana's fleeting vision of being trapped in a little shop of horrors becomes a haunting, expressly theatrical metaphor for a claustrophobic life that is fast closing in on women on the verge of giving up.

### **Card and Gift**

By Kate E. Ryan; directed by Ken Rus Schmoll; sets by Daniel Zimmerman; costumes by Jessica Pabst; lighting by Les Dickert; sound by Leah Gelpe; production stage manager, Lisa McGinn. Presented by Clubbed Thumb Summerworks, Maria Striar, producing artistic director; Sarah McLellan, managing director; Michael Bulger, associate producer. At the Wild Project, 195 East Third Street, East Village; [clubbedthumb.org](http://clubbedthumb.org). Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour 5 minutes.

WITH: Ella Dershowitz (Shana), Mia Katigbak (Lila), Connie Ray (Annette), Scott Sowers (Mick) and Laura Esterman (Johnnie/Agnes).

## ***Card and Gift*: Theater review by Helen Shaw**

Kate E. Ryan's melancholic *Card and Gift* takes place in a New Hampshire store where small-town malaise is approaching Beckettian proportions. What, exactly, is being sold in this sad, undersupplied and overstaffed gift shop? There are some flags, some wind-up novelties, a lonely model of a Greyhound bus on an unreachable shelf above the door. But no one ever seems to buy anything, and the workers would all be better off if they got out.



*Card and Gift* is like a modern La Brea tar pit, trapping various species of American woman so that a scientifically curious audience can examine them at leisure. The types: one-time artist and lost soul Lila (Mia Katigbak), in her 50s, trying to run her parents' store in a resort town that fun forgot; her friend and daffy employee Annette (Connie Ray), who dreams of helping a candidate into the White House; and Shana (Ella Dershowitz), an exaggeratedly awful up-talking millennial, so entitled and dependent that she solicits help in cutting out paper dolls. Ryan's characterizations can be cruel, and both Dershowitz and Ray respond with broad, funny portrayals. Katigbak, though, seems sunk in grief that seems simultaneously personal and existential.



Ryan's take on the "pushed realism" genre (see Annie Baker's *The Flick*) can be a little too arch; her approximation of a dull day in retail can, despite the play's brief scenes, sometimes drag. But fired into this crowd like a wacky Roman candle comes Laura Esterman, a giggling zany with razor-blade eyes. Is she one character or two? The program gives her two names, yet she plays a similar trickster both times—a nasty seatmate at a bus stop and a seemingly cheery customer who turns into an admonishment from Lila's past.

In the play's best scene, Esterman careers into the shop, demanding one of Lila's old paintings; Lila, terrified, hides her face in the shadows. (Here, lighting designer Les Dickert goes full noir to great effect.) Director Ken Rus Schmoll and the other designers have interpolated moments of nightmare strangeness into the production, but this one scene reverberates in uncanny ways. Ryan is sketching different iterations of the American fantasist—incompetent Shana dreams of saving people; unworldly Annette dreams of a President who would be a reflection of herself. But it's Lila's lost dream that the piece seems to understand best: the dream of an artist no longer making art but reluctant to be forgotten.—HS

## ***D Deb Debbie Deborah*: Theater review** by Helen Shaw

### **FOUR STARS – CRITICS' PICK**

Most of the time, the tiptoeing critic can avoid spoilers: You hint at plot without telling who dies; you don't give away the 11th-hour coup de théâtre. But what to do when a thriller puts its best, most surprising scene in its first 15 minutes? The only option is to get a bit...vague. Let me hasten to add that this review will be the most *positive* vague I can manage, since Jerry Lieblach's *D Deb Debbie Deborah* boasts moments of slippery gorgeousness, some of which have to be seen to be believed. Yet exactly how he and expert director Lee Sunday Evans manipulate our understanding of identity should probably remain a mystery, perhaps even to we who have seen the show.



Photo by Elke Young

The titular Deb (deft, hilarious Brooke Bloom) has just started a new job. After some uncanny experiences at home—an intercom conversation turns eerie, her boyfriend (Nick Choksi) seems unfamiliar—she finds herself working for a famous artist (Geoff Sobelle), helping him with a project based in imitation and re-creation. The project eats up her time, then it seems to eat up the play itself: Sobelle and Choksi repeatedly exchange roles, and even Deb herself frays existentially. When more art-world characters arrive (played by Stacey Yen and Kate Benson), they sometimes play the same characters we've already met.

Has Deb gone mad? Or is this theater's revenge for centuries of double casting? By the play's whirling climax, five actors play an entire gallery's worth of people, the boundaries of established character dissolving into a mad storm of changing selves.

Lieblach also wrote the recent *Ghost Stories*, another Escheresque narrative that allowed actors to move in and out of roles, keeping the audience just off balance. In *D Deb Debbie Deborah*, Lieblach gives that project a distinctly Charlie Kaufman spin—the same meta-media games, the same permeating mood of heartbreak.

Crucially, though, Lieblach's trickery is rooted in a deep understanding of what live performance makes possible. Designer Brett J. Banakis shapes the tiny Wild Project into a deceptively plain magician's box, using walls that stop a foot and a half before the floor. The fact that we can see people's legs as they approach from offstage gives the whole thing a "nothing up my sleeves" innocence, a transparency the production is eager to exploit. *Deb* is another expertly produced Clubbed Thumb Summerworks show, crafted exquisitely to showcase a script. You should know the piece is not perfect—the pace flags in the final third, the ending stutters, and not everyone in the cast can manage the show's ontological acrobatics. But whatever the minor fumbles, Lieblach has managed the ultimate bit of theatrical prestidigitation. Shazam, folks! Out of nowhere, he appears on the scene.—HS