

## In ‘Wilder Gone,’ the Pull of Soil, Soul and Preacher Sex

by Jesse Green | June 7, 2018



(to read the full review, visit [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

The theater company Clubbed Thumb says its mission is to develop and produce “funny, strange and provocative new plays by living American writers.”

Mission accomplished: “Wilder Gone,” the second of three productions in Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks festival this year, is a funny, strange and provocative new play by Angela Hanks, a living — and promising — young playwright from Dallas.



Washington Kirk, left, and Crystal Dickinson, with Markita Prescott in the far background. Photo credit Emon Hassan for the New York Times

“Wilder Gone” is also from Dallas, which is to say from its history. Set in 1921, mostly on a contested piece of property on Wilder Street in a black neighborhood still arising from uncultivated farmland, it concerns a biracial woman named Thalia (Toni Ann DeNoble) who has come with her frustrated boyfriend, Streeter (Hubert Point-Du Jour), to build a “nice quaint” house after losing her ancestral home near Houston.

But describing “Wilder Gone” this way is like describing a watercolor by the metals and dyes that compose it chemically. Yes, Ms. Hanks has serious business in mind: Thalia, protective of her light-skinned privilege, resists marrying Streeter, who is darker. And her nearest new neighbor, an aspiring preacher named Mabel (Crystal Dickinson), resents Thalia’s claim on property she has long intended as the site of a grand, if hand-sewn, revival tent.

Then there are the mysteriously hunky preacher, John Jack; the madame and part-time mystic, Dotte; the industrious newsboy, Oliver Oak, who is also a clerk at the five-and-dime and — sure, why not? — the local baker; and Peanut Brittle, a 14-year-old orphan who lives in a boardinghouse and is Mabel’s only congregant so far.

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They each have serious — even, as promised, provocative — issues pushing them through the plot, which is basically framed as the competition between soil and spirit: building a house and building faith. Notably, four of the seven characters have lost one or both of their parents, making the search for some kind of stability resonate. And though no white people interlope to overstate the point, racism, internalized or otherwise, hums in the background.

“Do you feel all right in the world?” Thalia asks Streeter. She means as a black man, and from her own experience, even as someone who can pass, she doubts it.

But as the name Peanut Brittle suggests — and as the blue-sky and bricolage set by Reid Thompson confirms — the top notes here are “funny” and “strange.” The director Margot Bordelon draws out everything zany from the story’s incongruous juxtapositions while maintaining a fleet pace, and has cast the play with actors who straddle the “provocative” line gracefully.

Mabel’s susceptibility to the pleasures of the flesh, and the ungodly eagerness of John Jack (Washington Kirk) to accommodate her, are somehow both coy and sexy while also giving the lie to stereotypes about people of faith and people of 1921. Likewise, Markita Prescott and Christopher Livingston, as Peanut Brittle and Oliver Oak, apply inventive comic veneers to characters built on loss.

A sign that the funny and strange are staying within bounds is that the less outré moments do not seem out of place. The scenes between Thalia and Streeter, building their house while wrangling over their future, might almost come from a much more serious play, so frankly are they rendered. And the quiet moment in which Dotte (Nicole Lewis) reads Mabel’s fate in tarot cards is an acting class in naturalism. You could wish it went on much longer.

Still, fitting all this into 90 minutes makes for a perfect summer show, a trick Clubbed Thumb seems to have mastered. Earlier productions, including “Tin Cat Shoes” in May and, in previous seasons, “Men on Boats” and “Of Government,” hit all the right notes; and the Summerworks home at the Wild Project in the East Village, with its garage-door entry open to the street, makes seeing the plays seem like a friendly invitation instead of a cultural duty. The price — seats are \$25, or \$20 for students — helps with that as well.

But I don’t mean to suggest that plays like these are mere fair-weather friends. Despite its bright cheer and generally happy ending — not to mention the rat-a-tat of laughter throughout — “Wilder Gone” really does fulfill the “provocative” part of Clubbed Thumb’s mission, insofar as hopefulness may now feel provocative. It’s hard not to be moved, and challenged, when Streeter, answering Thalia’s question, says yes, despite everything lined up against a poor black man in Texas in 1921, “I have felt all right in this world.”

Summer or not, it’s a start.

## ‘Tin Cat Shoes,’ a Commentary on the Silliness of the System

by Ben Brantley | May 22, 2018

(to read the full review, visit [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

To your cherished list of warm-weather city pleasures — handmade Italian ices, sidewalk breezes on bare limbs, dumb movies in air-conditioned theaters — you should think about adding Summerworks. Now 23 years old, this staple of the East Village culturescape, which has initiated its latest season with a mind-frisking comedy called “Tin Cat Shoes,” provides entertainment that feels custom-made for a “school’s out” state of mind.

For starters, its ticket prices are cheap (\$25). But the shows it puts on, under the banner of Clubbed Thumb productions, always look inventively stylish, rather like the luminous young things of the neighborhood who assemble thrift-shop rags into passable imitations of couture. The casts regularly include quirky familiar faces you just know you’ve seen before, whether on Broadway or “Law & Order.”

As for those of you who like to imagine you’re at the vanguard of all things artistic, Summerworks allows you to say you knew certain rising playwrights before your friends did. Samuel D. Hunter (“The Whale”), Clare Barron (the current “Dance Nation”), Anne Washburn (“Mr. Burns”) and Sarah DeLappe (“The Wolves”) have all worked with Clubbed Thumb.

But if you just want to chill out with a buzz on, Summerworks is good for that, too. Its productions are usually short and intermission-free, and it specializes in funny, agreeably unhinged shows that often don’t make a lot of sense until you think about them afterward. Watching these productions, you are advised to drift with the bubbly flow as you wonder what on earth was in that drink you had earlier.

Which brings us to Trish Harnetiaux’s “Tin Cat Shoes,” which runs through May 29 and is directed by Knud Adams. This story of a peppy troop of shoe-store employees in the Pacific Northwest is, in many ways, a classic shaggy dog story. Or rather, shaggy bear. Such an animal figures prominently in the play’s looping plot, when it sucks (or is it pulls?) one of the characters on a company outing into its cave. Of course, it could have been one of those “bear paws on a stick,” like people carry at parades in New Orleans.

That’s according to a guy named Lunch (Pete Simpson), who really doesn’t know what he’s talking about but says it with great authority. As he should. Lunch has been trained by his employer, Rex (played by that sacred eminence of downtown mayhem, David Greenspan).

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Rex, you see, is “a Systems Guy,” who teaches those who work for him (his “team-family”) to think in terms of the principals of his “Shoe System.” This is what the newest member of the establishment, Gemma (Emily Cass McDonnell), has to learn.

The others — who also include Pepper (Donnetta Lavinia Grays) and Cheddar (Kyle Beltran) — are eager to initiate her into the mindless minutiae of said System, as well as their shared personal mythology. They love to perform

“Fugue for Tinhorns” from “Guys and Dolls” and tell the story of what Cheddar did with the hambone left over.

In its opening scenes, “Tin Cat Shoes” may put you in mind of a stretched-out sketch from “Portlandia,” the TV series that sends up the green-thinking, cosmos-contemplating denizens of Oregon coffee shops. But Ms. Harnetiaux is following her own System.

This goal is realized through a series of scenes in which our fumbling characters try to impose order on chaos in the Washington State wilderness (rendered in a wonderfully kitschy great outdoors setting by Kimie Nishikawa). The same impulse propels the team to try to beat the house in a Brigadoon-like mountainside casino into which they stumble.

And Pepper is systematically putting together a novel about nachos. In the gravelly voice of authority that is unique to Ms. Grays (“Men on Boats”), she ponders the book’s elements: “Grilled hamburger ... iceberg lettuce ... sour cream!” She is interrupted by Gemma, who observes, “You realize you’re just naming ingredients, right?” But as a cryptic croupier at the roulette table (Mr. Greenspan) points out: “You know who else named ingredients? Shakespeare.”

You should not discount the particular joys of hearing Mr. Simpson — whose credits (Elevator Repair Service, Wooster Group, etc.) read like a map of the downtown avant-garde — pronounce the word “abstemious.” Of watching Mr. Beltran (“Fortress of Solitude”) beaming with shy but demented adoration. Or seeing Ms. McDonnell (“The Antipodes”) morph from a dewy rookie into a hard-bitten gambler à la Jeanne Moreau in “Bay of Angels.”

At the end of the show, you will be handed a sheet of discussion questions. It concludes with: “Name all the similarities to your own life that you found in this play. Now, try your best to set the list to music!”

I can think of worse summer projects.



## In ‘Plano,’ Two Multiplying Husbands Outnumber Three Sisters

By Laura Collins-Hughes | June 24, 2018

(to read the full review, visit [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

Meet Steve. He’s a blandly cheery white guy, originally from Long Island, but living in Dallas for so long by now that he says “y’all.” On the surface, his marriage to Genevieve looks perfect, but then it splits apart and so does he — multiple Steves, variations on a theme, all of them living in Genevieve’s head. And some of them in her house.

Meet John — well, Juan, really; he’s from Mexico. But he always wanted to be a John, and now that he’s married to Anne, Genevieve’s sister, he insists on it. Their union, on his side, may not exactly be a love match. He’s gay, and he needed a green card, and he’s barely around. John has multiple selves, too, but Anne is very, very good at ignoring them.

“Do you mind if we stop talking about John,” she says to her family, and it is not a question. But the women of Will Arbery’s surreal, funny, ultimately muddled “Plano” return and return and return to the subject of their men. If these sisters — Anne (Crystal Finn), Genevieve (Miriam Silverman) and the youngest, Isabel (Susannah Flood) — are cursed, which they believe they are, it is with the need to devote vast emotional acreage to men who do not return the favor.



From left, Susannah Flood, Crystal Finn and Miriam Silverman.  
Photo Credit Caitlin Ochs for the New York Times

Part of Clubbed Thumb’s Summerworks series at the Wild Project, this beautifully paced production by Taylor Reynolds is as comically headlong as Mr. Arbery’s script, its slip-slide of time fast and ever-shifting. “I’ll introduce him later,” Anne tells her sisters when she first gets together with John (Cesar J. Rosado). Then, instantly: “It’s later, here he is.”

Ms. Reynolds, whose excellent cast nails the heightened tone, stages some moments so vividly that they are probably more memorable than the overloaded play: Steve (Ryan King) diving headlong into the porch (the set is by Daniel Zimmerman), where he disappears; Isabel and Anne leaping on Steve in a futile attempt to kill him, using as one of their weapons (Mr. Arbery specifies this in a stage direction) a copy of Karl Ove Knausgaard’s “My Struggle: Book One.”

## Hipsters Double-Check Their Privilege in ‘Cute Activist’

by Jesse Green | February 3, 2018

(to read the full review, visit [nytimes.com](https://www.nytimes.com))

Jen is a white, 26-year-old architect hoping to “decolonialize” herself by hooking up with a black man. Gil is a black, 22-year-old caregiver whose goal is to become a stay-at-home dad with a well-paid wife.

Despite their apparent compatibility, their first date, at a restaurant featuring \$50 salads, doesn’t go well.

Gil seems more interested in Jen’s bread-winning potential than in her painful struggle to regret her advantages. He doesn’t love being part of her decolonialization project. At the same time, Jen is less than impressed with Gil’s frequently touted feminist credentials. “How, specifically, do you support women,” she asks, “besides being vaguely personally effeminate?”

And they’re both rude to the waiter.



This pair, whom privilege has turned into ludicrous moral pretzels, is at the center of “Cute Activist,” a zippy new comedy by Milo Cramer at the Bushwick Starr. Serious-minded yet silly, dense with wordplay and anything-goes theatricality, the play is so heavily swaddled in its down vest of irony, snark and satire that you can hardly locate its heart.

But what a brilliant match of material and theater it is. Supposedly set in “a spoOoOoky town in mythical

Connecticut where inequality reigns,” the world of the play feels exactly like, you know, Bushwick, with its tenements and wine bars cheek by jowl. Packed into the Starr’s 71 seats on Friday night, the audience, whose average age seemed to be 25, looked an awful lot like the characters onstage.

Or like Jen and Gil at least. But “Cute Activist,” produced by the Starr along with New Saloon, in association with Clubbed Thumb, represents (and satirizes) nonhipsters too. The waiter and the restaurant’s manager — who, tellingly, are given no names, just occupations — are a middle-

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aged lesbian couple hanging onto a “speck” of a home amid rampant overdevelopment. They put up with the likes of Jen and Gil because they have no choice: “Restaurants are places people pay to act like babies,” Waiter explains.

At the other extreme is a character called Landlorde — the “e,” he says, is a “baroque flourish” — who sets about his project of gentrification with the erotic eagerness of Dracula. He even wears a cape.

Mr. Cramer is not too proud to take some dramatic shortcuts: Landlorde not only owns the restaurant but also employs Jen to design the skyscrapers that will replace affordable homes like the one that Waiter and Manager live in. Nor does the playwright hesitate to employ a series of adorable woodland critters to decorate the action. Puppets representing a mouse, a deer and a bluebird urge the characters and presumably the audience on a journey toward goodness, true love and, in Jen’s case, activism.

But if daring to become an activist — the word is taboo in this dystopian Disneyland — is merely a way of salving liberal guilt, how meaningful can it be? A secret meeting of would-be do-gooders is treated just as satirically as Landlorde’s greed: The participants, wearing Mardi Gras masks, do little but argue over terminology and who should pay for the doughnuts. Their most coherent chant is “I care more about being cool than I do about social justice.”

Intercutting scenes of Jen’s moral dithering with scenes in which Waiter and Manager dither emotionally, the playwright convincingly suggests a world in which only evil is decisive. Jen can’t even figure out whether love is worth pursuing because it neither advances her professionally nor helps the world. It is, she concludes, outside her mission statement.

Madeline Wise, who has the wit and grit of a young Allison Janney, manages to keep Jen from becoming insufferable; she’s too real in her absurd self-questioning to dismiss. The rest of the (human) cast, including Ronald Peet as Gil, Annie Henk as Waiter and Elizabeth Kenny as Manager, generally walk the satire tightrope with confidence, neither falling into sketch comedy vacuity on one side nor undeserved pathos on the other. And the sui generis David Greenspan, luxury-cast as Landlorde, creates from his usual drawls and eccentricities a character that exists completely beyond those parameters.

Aside from the puppet animals — Mr. Cramer is one of the puppeteers — there are live video, recorded video, distorted audio, scenes set in the dark and a chanteuse (Deepali Gupta) wandering in and out of the action, crooning like Lana Del Rey. Likewise the set, by Meredith Ries, is more of a collage of images vaguely related to the theme (kindergarten chairs, an inflatable doughnut) than a way of anchoring the action in real places.

Of course, for much of the audience, anchoring “Cute Activist” in a real place would be redundant. They already know they’re in Bushwick, Brooklyn; they may already be struggling with the privilege that brought them there.