

Theatre

Creepy clowns kick off festival

Magnetic North opens with a bang

By Joel Rubinoff

From: Waterloo Region Record

Published on Friday, June 11, 2010

Mump & Smoot: Cracked

Created by John Turner and Michael Kennard

Directed by Karen Hines

Starring John Turner and Michael Kennard

At Theatre of the Arts, University of Waterloo

Who would have thought clowns could be so terrifying?

That's the unofficial tag line of *Mump & Smoot Cracked*, the ambitious opening night kickoff of the prestigious Magnetic North Theatre Festival.

Sited as Canada's premiere festival of cutting edge contemporary theatre, this beacon of cross-cultural pollination moves annually between cities and, this year, boasts 176 events over 11 days at venues around Kitchener and Waterloo.

And after one performance, one thing is clear: If these caustic comedy creations who joke in gibberish, ingest rubber mice in hilarious vaudevillian fashion and sever off limbs in grotesquely graphic detail are any indication, this isn't going to be a soothing festival of warmed-over Broadway claptrap.

Clowns from hell, they've been dubbed, and after 75 minutes of this Laurel and Hardy meets Jason from *Friday the 13th*, while *Waiting For Godot* excursion, you won't know whether to laugh, cry or simply admire the audacity of creators Michael Kennard and John Turner.

This, of course, is exactly the point, as these fearless culture warriors seduce you with nonsensical outpourings and *Three Stooges* shenanigans only to upend expectations with a surrealistic turn toward tragedy that involves a pair of scissors and what looks like, ulp, a primitive hacksaw.

Played out on a cartoonish set that includes a giant egg, oversized diaper hammocks and what appears to be a pre-historic barber chair, the show juxtaposes discordant elements in a way that is by turns humorously engaging and, once blood starts spurting, deliberately provocative.

The subtext, if I read my existential allusions correctly, is that life may seem frivolous on the surface, but when you peel beneath the surface, believe me, buster, it's bleepin' brutal.

Having said this, it's an uneasy balance, and personally, I left the theatre feeling more unsettled than enlightened.

But I may not be typical. Not having experienced these Canadian comedy mavericks during their 22-year career—including an extended hiatus for the past eight—I may be out of the loop when it comes to appreciating their pathos-spiked fringe humour (plus I'm not, admittedly, in any way "cool").

Certainly, the audience responded positively when Smoot, the squealing childish one, and Mump, the exasperated homicidal one, butted heads over the appropriate level of reverence for a giant mystic egg, debated whether to drink the colourful potions on their pre-industrial ice cream cart and, in a mesmerizing dream sequence, sashayed across the stage with near-balletic grace.

And the nervous titters during the act's more unsavoury moments—and "unsavoury" is a word I don't use lightly—indicated an audience willing to throw caution to the wind.

I won't bore you with plot details of this dark, demented fairy tale, which involves faith, mortality and religious doctrine on a parallel world called Ummo and, at times, seems like a fleshed-out version of TV satire *South Park*.

Suffice it to say these gibberish-spewing misfits make beautiful music together—literally, on twin ukuleles—and are capable of both great tenderness and jarring violence as their fog-drenched world tightens its metaphysical noose.

There's no actual dialogue, though their inscrutable outpourings do segue into recognizably English verbiage every now and then, but their performances are so note-perfect—and Karen Hines' direction so clear and uncluttered—you never feel in the dark about the emotions on display.

They also—and consider yourself warned—make a point of interacting with the audience.

It's a bravura act that will delight many with its outrageous subversion of a popular stereotype, but take heed: that "Not for children!" warning isn't there for promotional purposes.