

DOWNTOWN EXPRESS

At Axis, ‘aggressive surrealism’ immerses, engages, messes with you

October 26, 2011 | Filed under: Arts | Posted by: admin

“

[media-credit name="Photo by Lucas Longacre" align="aligncenter" width="600"]



[/media-credit]

The three faces of “Bad Kid.”

Productions feature bad, brave kids and the ‘coolest stage snow’ you’ll ever see

BY MARTIN DENTON | Axis Company occupies the building at One Sheridan Square that once housed the Ridiculous Theatrical Company — and while their aesthetic is markedly different from Charles Ludlam’s, their dedication and commitment to the creation of theater that challenges assumptions about how art (and the world) works is as strong as their predecessor’s. That’s one of the reasons I keep going there.

A visit to Axis is always a surprise for the senses, from whatever themed art-or-artifact display is housed in the theater lobby, to whatever astonishing, inventive (possibly multimedia, probably sensorially assaulting) experience Axis’s artistic director Randy Sharp and her colleagues have cooked up for us inside the theater.

Axis Company’s mission is to present “aggressive surrealism, classic vaudeville turns and vanguard adaptation.” I love that first part. Aggressive surrealism — as if plain old passive surrealism is too worried about our feelings and our comfort zones. Axis’s space is deliciously comfortable. In fact, it’s sumptuous by indie/Off-Off-Broadway standards (and fully equipped with all sorts of techie goodies that make their way into the company’s productions). But don’t expect your mind to take a vacation when you’re seeing an Axis show. Expect, instead, to become immersed, engaged, shaken up and messed with.

There are two signature (usually annual) events at Axis. Most summers, they give us a new edition of “Hospital” — a four-part serial examining the inner life of a person who is in a coma. It sounds weird, I know. But once you see the first episode, you’ll be hooked and absolutely need to see the next three. Sharp and her cast and crew (including a nonpareil design and production staff led by sound designer Steve Fontaine and lighting designer David Zeffren) create new scenarios for each of the “Hospital” shows, then create entirely new worlds in which to house them. Using film and video, music and a troupe of recurring off-kilter doctors and nurses (usually played by David Crabb, Paul Marc Barnes and Laurie Kilmartin), these artists take audiences to places that their wildest imaginings never dreamed of. But unlike the wild drug trip that this serial could resemble, there’s thematic unity and purpose, throughout.

Most Decembers, Axis mounts Sharp’s holiday show “Seven in One Blow, or The Brave Little Kid” — a musical for kids of all ages (Honest!). Without ever being cloying, and with the utter originality that we always find at Axis (even though this is based on a Grimm Brothers fairy tale), “Seven” reminds us of what Christmas is actually supposed to be about. Among many other wonderful qualities, this production sports the coolest stage snow I’ve ever seen. It returns to Axis on December 2, for its 10th anniversary revival.

At Axis from October 28 through November 12, is “Bad Kid” — a new one-man play written and performed by Axis Company member David Crabb (directed and co-written by Josh Matthews). “I was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. Entering my teens, I felt pretty disenfranchised and scared about the ways I considered myself ‘different’,” Crabb told me. “I luckily found a group of freaks, punks and Goth kids who not only accepted me, but made me feel, by comparison, almost ‘normal’. This play is about how I changed during that time period towards the end of high school.” Crabb — a two-time MothSlam champion, co-producer of Kevin Allison’s “RISK!” and co-creator and producer of the live storytelling series “ASK ME” — is a superb performer and actor who refers to the Axis Company as “family.” Sharp and Brian Barnhart (the company’s producing director) certainly come across as startlingly nurturing, generous souls.

In addition to Crabb, the Axis “family” includes such remarkably talented folks as actor/playwright Marc Palmieri (“Levittown,” “Carl the Second”), actor/director George Demas (Krapp, 39; the recent David Cromer revival of “Our Town”), and the incomparable actor-writer-raconteur Edgar Oliver. The last solo show developed at Axis was Oliver’s sublimely strange “East 10th Street: Self Portrait with Empty House” — which went on to long runs at PS 122 and became a hit at the Edinburgh Fringe (where it won the prestigious Fringe First Award, and at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina). So Crabb is following in some mighty footsteps.

And he’s working, of course, in a house with a pretty grand history. The ghosts of the Ridiculous Theatrical Company linger, I imagine; and in the dozen years since Axis took over the space, they’ve amassed an impressive roster of work themselves. Their revival of the 1840s melodrama “A Glance at New York” is another of their major hits, while recent new plays by Sharp such as “Trinity 5:29” (about the creation of the first atomic bomb) and “Down There” (inspired by the real-life 1965 torture murder of Sylvia Likens) have been among the most memorable works I’ve witnessed on stage in the past few years.

Adventurous theatergoers will want to check out Crabb’s “Bad Kid,” and really anything that turns up at Axis. Another great thing about this company: The ticket prices are super-reasonable (just \$15 for “Bad Kid,” with \$10 tickets available for students and seniors). So between the unstintingly high quality that pervades the place, an authentic coolness vibe, and an economical price, Axis should be one of your go-to destinations for amazing new theater experiences. It definitely is one of mine.

For more info, visit badkidtheshow.com and axiscompany.org. Martin Denton is the editor of nytheatre.com and indietheaternow.com.