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THEATER REVIEW | 'THE SLUG BEARERS OF KAYROL ISLAND (OR, THE FRIENDS OF DR. RUSHOWER)'

The Worlds of Flesh and of Ink Blur in an Animated Landscape

By [BEN BRANTLEY](#)

Flat feels surprisingly full in “The Slug Bearers of Kayrol Island (Or, the Friends of Dr. Rushower),” the droll and hypnotizing musical that opened on Tuesday night at the Vineyard Theater. This deadpan fable of colliding cultures from the urban-lore cartoonist [Ben Katchor](#) blurs the line between two and three dimensions to the point that it creates its own spatial universe, delicately wedged in between.

The live actors who wander among the animated landscapes that fill the Vineyard stage seem transformed into brave new hybrids of flesh and ink. They’re so insistently subsumed by the drawings that surround them that we, by extension, are too. “The Slug Bearers” is an answered prayer for anyone who has dreamed of living inside a graphic novel.

Make that for anyone who dreams of crossing into a completely sustained alternative reality, which I assume means a lot of adventurous theatergoers. There’s not an element in this production, directed by Bob McGrath, that doesn’t match the visual surface. That includes its impeccably sung performances, its libretto (by Mr. Katchor) and, most remarkably, its expressively linear score by Mark Mulcahy.

Mr. Katchor, whose work has appeared in *The Village Voice* and *New York Press*, has developed an ardent cult following with his comic-strip narratives of obsessive eccentrics who populate an obsessively and eccentrically reimagined New York City. His books include “The Jew of New York” and “Julius Knipl, Real Estate Photographer.”

And though Mr. Katchor has said he has little interest in theater, his résumé includes an operetta (“The Carbon Copy Building,” seen at the [Brooklyn Academy of Music](#) in 1999) and, with Mr. Mulcahy, “The Rosenbach Company: A Tragicomedy,” performed in 2006 at Joe’s Pub. Let it be said, though, that there’s little crowd-courting Broadway razzmatazz in a Katchor musical.

Like one of its poker-faced characters, “The Slug Bearers,” which was performed at the Kitchen in 2004, exudes a heavy passivity that would be oppressive were it not for the feathery, tickling wit

that lurks beneath. Its heroine, GinGin (Jody Flader) — the daughter of the electronics tycoon and philanthropist Dr. Rushower (Peter Friedman) — finds what she reads in the newspapers so upsetting that it's hard for her to leave her bed in the glamorous penthouse apartment that she shares with her father.

Fate — or anyway, strategically spilled strawberry ice cream, dropped from the apartment terrace — unites her with Immanuel Lubang (Bobby Steggert), a young man devoted to the poetry of vintage home-appliance manuals. They develop a shared concern for the exploited workers of Kayrol Island, who transport on their shoulders the metal slugs exported worldwide to weigh down flyaway everyday objects like toasters and telephones.

I am delivering this improbable exposition without a wink, because that's what the show does. Know, though, that even if you enter into the idiosyncratic spirit of the plot as described thus far, you're unlikely to predict where it will take you.

“The Slug Bearers” may deal with subjects common to contemporary satire: fiendish industrial autocrats (in this case, the cackling George Klatter, played by a Lex Luthor-like Stephen Lee Anderson); shortsighted do-gooders; the limited attention span of news gatherers; and the (literal) insubstantiality of a technology-driven culture.

But Mr. Katchor is not an attack artist, and “The Slug Bearers” is neither sendup nor angry social rebuke.

Instead, like much of this artist's work, it is propelled by a brooding and amused awareness of the strange, individual quirks and appetites that both keep people apart and occasionally bring them together.

This sensibility is conveyed with real enchantment by the set and projection designs of Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg (subtly enhanced by Russell H. Champa's lighting), which bring to eye-teasing life Mr. Katchor's drawings of lonely town (as in New York City) and polluted country (as in the tropical isle of Kayrol). Projections on scrims are used to create some delightful trompe l'oeil moments involving walking amid street traffic, riding elevators and even answering the phone.

These are never mere sight gags, though, but part of a thoroughgoing *mise-en-scène* that melts boundaries between the real and representational. At the same time there's a strong, melancholy suggestion that the people who inhabit this flat but fluid landscape can never fully step into the world they live in. (And I mean the characters, not the performers.)

Mr. Mulcahy's music, performed by four dexterous musicians, is also flat and fluid, matching the show's look. Most of the songs are protracted vamps, with a limited range of notes dancing on an

extended single line. (Imagine [Philip Glass](#) in a party mood.) But the variations he renders within this limited framework range wide: finger-snapping beatnik jazz; fancy-tickling lyricism; hip-swaying calypso; impulse-dictating advertising jingles.

The disciplined and charming cast — which also includes Will Swenson, Tom Riis Farrell and, as a happily narcotized slug bearer, the seductively sluggish Matt Pearson — grasp the hard and crucial distinction between human cartoon and overblown caricature. Like Mr. Mulcahy's music, they pack maximal effect into minimal expression, appropriate to a show that considers the value of heft and weight within paper-thin flimsiness.

They were so persuasive, in fact, that when I left the Vineyard and entered the throngs at Union Square, I had to blink to clear my eyes. All the people on the streets appeared to have been drawn by Mr. Katchor.

THE SLUG BEARERS OF KAYROL ISLAND (OR, THE FRIENDS OF DR. RUSHOWER)

Libretto and drawings by [Ben Katchor](#); music by Mark Mulcahy; directed by Bob McGrath; choreography by John Carrafa; set and projection design by Jim Findlay and Jeff Sugg; costumes by Mattie Ullrich; lighting by Russell H. Champa; sound by David Arnold and Brett Jarvis; musical direction by Erik James; music supervisor, Randall Eng; associate artistic director, Sarah Stern. Presented by the Vineyard Theater, Douglas Aibel, artistic director. At the Vineyard Theater, 108 East 15th Street, Manhattan; (212) 353-0303. Through March 2. Running time: 2 hours.

WITH: Stephen Lee Anderson (George Klatter), Tom Riis Farrell (Butler/Pilot), Jody Flader (GinGin), Peter Friedman (Dr. Rushower), Matt Pearson (Samson), Bobby Steggert (Immanuel Lubang) and Will Swenson (Psychiatrist/Dry Cleaner).