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“A Dickensian dystopia filtered through the skewed aesthetics of Tim Burton...**SKINNAMARINK proudly flies a purely theatrical freak flag.**”

– New York Times (**Critics’ Pick**) on “SKINNAMARINK”

“Little Lord has managed to keep an admirable level of **terroristic mayhem** in its work—a **zany overmuchness that experimental theater needs like oxygen.**”

– Time Out New York (**4 Stars / Recommended**) on “SKINNAMARINK”

“Little Lord is **bananas-brains...a heaping portion of crazy.**”

– Theatre is Easy on “SKINNAMARINK”

“SKINNAMARINK is a **hilarious blast of brightly vivid creativity, a wicked skip down memory lane and an indictment on the persistently pushed cultural homogenization of our society.**”

– Theatre Reviews From My Seat on “SKINNAMARINK”

“There are **darker currents sweeping under, and occasionally subsuming, the campy surfaces** in which Little Lord traffics. These depths, like the aroma of Pop-Tarts, are a **welcome and heartening surprise.**”

– New York Times (**Critics’ Pick**) on “BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS”

“The zany company Little Lord whips on its long apron, flips a napkin over its arm and serves up a **nicely realized bit of perverse wackadoodle frivolity...Surely it will touch something in you that will wriggle with pleasure.**”

– Time Out New York on “BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS”

“**To call Little Lord’s work ambitious is an understatement. It is fearless in its weirdness.**”

– Tablet Magazine on “BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS”

“Little Lord has created **an anarchic pastiche of voices, atmospheres, songs, and other cultural**

flotsam that is by turns, funny, unsettling, and strangely affecting, but always mesmerizing.”

– Culture Catch on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“Enormously meditative, funny, and an elaborate poem for the senses.”

– Theatre is Easy on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“Little Lord makes difficult, dense (but still raucous and joyful) theater.”

– Culturebot on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“Little Lord makes collage theater with snacks. Seemingly disparate ideas get put through the creative team’s blender, and the result is **something satisfying but wholly unexpected...it’s emotional, playful, and often very funny.”**

– Village Voice (**Voice Choice**) on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“The strange, talented minds at Little Lord have a knack for seeing patterns and creating some sort of order from chaos. **Be assured that they know what they’re doing.”**

– Jewcy on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“A fever dream that straddles the line between ecstatic and tragic.”

– Stage Buddy on “NOW IS THE TIME”

“Little Lord, who’ve made a forte out of retelling old stories with a gender-bending, irreverent twist, are worth keeping an eye out for.”

– Jewcy on “JEWQUEEN”

“Little Lord’s production bears the sparks of **scrappy creative brilliance** we’ve come to expect from them.”

– New York Theater Review on “Pocahontas, and/or AMERICA”

“An exuberantly campy rag-tag confection...a deliciously cheap, satisfying sugar rush with a little tartness thrown in for good measure.”

– New York Theater Review on “Babes in Toyland”

“Examining the unmentionable seems to be the theatrical mission of Little Lord.”

– NY Theatre Now on “BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS”

“Little Lord’s ‘Babes’ is **created from the stuff theatrical dreams are made of.**”

– ObsceneJester on “Babes in Toyland”

The New York Times

✔ Critics' Pick

Review: In 'Skinnamarink,' Follow Instructions. Or Else.

By ELIZABETH VINCENTELLI MARCH 13, 2019



From left, Fernando Gonzalez, Michael Levinton and Joshua William Gelb suffer comic punishment in "Skinnamarink."
Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Lesson 1: Adults wearing school uniforms will make almost anything look creepy. All the more so if said adults, all in blond wigs, have the fixed stare of cult members and often speak in unison.

In "Skinnamarink," a new play from the unpredictable troupe known as Little Lord, school is a Dickensian dystopia filtered through the skewed aesthetics of Tim Burton. Many contemporary plays, even those telegraphing transgressions, feel like live audition reels for television writing gigs. Happily, this one does not, and proudly flies a purely theatrical freak flag.

Seven pupils endure a surreal educational regimen with a mix of feverish enthusiasm and dead-eyed deference. Spiffy in their white-and-mint-green outfits, they go through roll call, reading exercises, synchronized calisthenics and “snackivities.”

One of those involves the “children” dipping a hand in a jar of peanut butter and smearing it all over their mouths. They never wipe off the sticky substance, whose aroma quickly permeates the intimate Next Door at New York Theater Workshop. This Smell-o-Vision effect contributes to the intense weirdness that saturates “Skinnamarink.” (People with peanut allergies may want to reconsider their tickets.)

Created by the company and directed by Michael Levinton, who is also in the cast, “Skinnamarink” was inspired by McGuffey’s Eclectic Readers, textbooks that were first published in 1836 and remained wildly popular until the early 20th century. Paralleling the books’ blend of pedagogy and moralizing, the show constantly plays off the double meaning of the word “instruction” — a schooling process but also a disciplinary tool. Groupthink is encouraged and whoever gets the dunce cap is shamed: “No one loves a bad boy. No one can love those who are bad.”

The children follow orders piped out from a speaker as a disembodied voice of authority (Kate Weber) leads the class through rote learning, cryptic drills and petty humiliations, all seasoned with a pinch of grotesque. At one point the students put on mouth retractors, making them look as if they are visiting a dentist in the darkly satirical series “Black Mirror.”

As always, Little Lord, which describes its shows as “junk spectacles,” practices an open-source approach. While much of the material, like a cautionary tale about a “greedy girl,” is lifted from the Eclectic Readers, the company’s magpie M.O. provides leeway to incorporate, say, a poem about Jack Frost (“Who hath killed the pretty flowers/Born and bred in summer bowers?”) or lines from V.C. Andrews’ “Flowers in the Attic” (“If I ever catch boys and girls using the facilities at the same time, I will quite relentlessly, and without mercy, peel the skins from your backs”).

These disparate borrowings are integrated into a bewildering whole that is much tighter than Little Lord’s chaotically sprawling previous production, “Now Is the Time. Now Is the Best Time. Now Is the Best Time of Your Life.” Even the titles reflect the difference, with three short sentences replaced by a single word — which refers to an old singalong that became a staple of the Canadian trio Sharon, Lois & Bram’s repertoire.

Another song by that combo is put to deliciously goofy use at the very end of the evening. By then the audience may not even mind that it, too, has been indoctrinated.

‘Skinnamarink’ Through March 23 at Next Door at New York Theater Workshop, Manhattan; 212-460-5475, nytw.org. Running time: 1 hour 15 minutes.

TimeOut **Skinnamarink**

New York

Theater, Drama



Recommended

Theater review by Helen Shaw

Wednesday March 13 2019

For about 75 delightfully repulsive minutes, you'll regret your childhood. Depending on how close the actors get to your row, you may regret the entire concept of children. The latest show in New York Theater Workshop's NextDoor series, *Skinnamarink* burlesques the first-grade experience, unseals old pleasures you might have forgotten (which may involve peeling scabs) and offers a damning critique of the way we teach the young. I don't want to oversell its qualities: It's a daffy show. But the downtown ensemble Little Lord tends to make the kind of seeming silliness that worms into your brain and comes out to play long after recess is over.

The theater has been dressed as a schoolroom. Set designer Marika Kent has found the exact rusty-red curtain from your elementary school, and the floor is covered in the lines you remember from handwriting workbooks. High up on each wall are the two suns of every classroom: the clock face and the intercom, both in pale golden spotlights. The actors of the Little Lord ensemble, directed by Michael Levinton, strap themselves into just-too-small green sweater vests and pinafores, and tilt their faces up expectantly. As the P.A. system (Kate Weber) directs them thither and yon, they eagerly take part in dictated exercises and "snackivities," learning to obey.

Levinton and his wild-eyed group use *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers*—a standard in American schools since the 1830s—as their source material, but we're never entirely sure when they've departed from the lesson plan. "What are in the eggs?" seems like it probably comes straight from McGuffey. But when the children chant about being better than animals, or about going keto? Unlikely. The play gets its rough energy from watching these slimy, messy "children" (who smear their cheeks and beards in peanut butter) try to fit into the regimentation of their training. The students are awful, but the pedagogy is scary too. Teaching kids seems like trying to push slugs into snail shells; the globbiness fights back.

The Little Lord gang has made a number of weird plays over the last decade (*Bambif*cker/Kaffeehaus* was a highpoint), but this one is, by design, its most disciplined. In the years since its founding in 2007, Little Lord has managed to keep an admirable level of terroristic mayhem in its work—a zany overmuchness that experimental theater needs like oxygen. Here we see what happens when the company also plays with rigidity and ritualistic action, and the clash between their chaos and McGuffey's order is both interesting and productive. Be warned, though: *Skinnamarink* is a horror show that takes old nostalgic objects (songs, games, nut-related snacks) and turns them nasty in your mouth. Remember the time you ate chalk? Or the time you thought Crisco was icing? This play will make you feel like a child again, whether you like the taste or not.

4th Street Theatre ([Off Broadway](#)). Created by Little Lord. Directed by Michael Levinton. With ensemble cast. Running time: 1hr 15mins. No intermission.



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October 19–November 5

WAKE IN FRIGHT

A NINETEENTH-CENTURY NEW YORKER LIVES HIS NIGHTMARES
IN BORSCHT BELT-SET PRODUCTION

Little Lord makes collage theater with snacks. Seemingly disparate ideas get put through the creative team's blender, and the result is something satisfying but wholly unexpected. Their new show, **Now Is the Time. Now Is the Best Time. Now Is the Best Time of Your Life.**, mixes up a kooky cocktail of Rip Van Winkle, *Prometheus Bound*, *Dirty Dancing*, and horror. Frightening garden gnomes and a liver-eating bird-woman play a part in this narrative and nightmare, which involves a man in 1809 New York City, Diedrich Knickerbocker, awakening two hundred years later in a decrepit old Borscht Belt resort. There is a method to the madness and a welcomingly weird vibe; even if nothing makes immediate sense, Little Lord's work offers layers of interesting images and concepts to bite into. It's not overly brainy — it's emotional, playful, and often very funny. With this production, expect coleslaw and see where it takes you. NICOLE SERRATORE

Various times, Abrons Arts Center, 466 Grand Street (enter at Pitt Street),
866-811-4111, abronartscenter.org, \$20–\$25



Little Lord puts its people through the wringer.

Whitney G-Bowley

The New York Times



Review: 'Bambi_____/Kaffeehaus' Mixes Up an Absurdist Linguistic Orgy

By **CLAUDIA LA ROCCO** MARCH 9, 2015

"What smells so good?" an audience member wondered as she perused the fantastically unhealthy buffet laid out for Saturday's matinee performance of Little Lord's "Bambi_____/Kaffeehaus" at the Brick. (The title includes an obscenity.)

An actor's prompt answer — "the Pop-Tarts" — was greeted with a brief silence by the theatergoer, and then, more statement than question, "You're kidding."

But no, it was true: baking in a toaster oven (this buffet spared no detail), that Pop-Tart made this little theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, smell divine. It also gave a hint of the delicious and tacky pleasures soon to come, in a production that plays slice and dice with Austrian and Brooklyn cafe culture, anthropomorphic literature, pornography, Zionism, anti-Semitism, psychoanalysis and some other things.

The organizing principle within this cheeky hot mess is Felix Salten, the Viennese-Jewish author of both "Bambi" and, anonymously, "Josephine Mutzenbacher: The Life Story of a Viennese Whore, as Told by Herself." Spliced together by Laura von Holt and Michael Levinton (also the director), and collaged with myriad other sources, these two texts entwine for an absurdist linguistic orgy in which the lines between sentimentality, sexual euphemism and, yes, political commentary, are constantly being mucked with.

The cast largely avoids — or at least makes fruitful use of when it doesn't — the tiredly ironic default mode that has settled over so much theater. (Polly Lee is a particular highlight, as is Anne Gridley, in a brilliant cameo.) And they do it all in aprons, suspenders, punishing tighty-whities and high heels, worn on their hands as daffy hooflike appendages. Doing impressive double duty as Bambi and a prostitute, Joshua William Gelb wears heels on his actual feet as well.

The costumes are designed by another performer, Elizabeth Barrett Groth, who also created the winningly chintzy set. This, of course, includes two stuffed deer heads, which begin the show balanced on their necks, their throats stretched back as if in erotic abandon.

There's very little actual eroticism in the show. But there are darker currents sweeping under, and occasionally subsuming, the campy surfaces in which Little Lord traffics. These depths, like the aroma of Pop-Tarts, are a welcome and heartening surprise.

"Bambi_____/Kaffeehaus" runs through March 21 at the Brick, 579 Metropolitan Avenue, at Lorimer Street, Williamsburg, Brooklyn; 718-285-3863, bricktheater.com.



UNLEASHING ‘BAMBI’ BACK INTO THE WILD

Feverish production explores classic animated character’s subversive roots

By Gabriela Geselowitz
March 19, 2015

An organized madness has taken over the Brick Theater in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, where a man playing a deer wears stilettos on his hands and photocopied images Klimt’s portrait of Adele Bloch-Bauer are mounted on corrugated cardboard, adorned with pasta, and spray painted gold. It’s all part of *BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS* (as it is politely stylized), a feverish exploration of creativity, violence, sexuality, and Jewish identity based on early 20th century Jewish Viennese writer Felix Salten and his two best-known works: *Bambi, a Life in the Woods*, which was adapted into the Disney animated film, and the pornographic fake autobiography *Josephine Mutzenbacher—The Life Story of a Viennese Whore, as Told by Herself*.

You read that right. Little Lord, the theater company behind the project, describes it as “madcap examination of early 20th century Vienna and of the forgotten artist behind both the world’s most beloved deer, as well as its most scandalous piece of pornography.”

Written collaboratively mostly by Michael Levinton and Laura von Holt (and directed by Levinton), to call the work ambitious is an understatement. It’s fearless in its weirdness, and its wonderful cast can make even the comically erotic retelling of a children’s story feel utterly sincere.

The creative team at Little Lord found the coincidence of the two works too enticing to resist unpacking—especially when they learned that Salten’s career also involved writing for the publication of his mentor, Theodor Herzl. As David Rakoff pointed out in these pages in 2006, Salten’s version of *Bambi* is a far cry from the saccharine Disney version we’re familiar with: “Salten’s writing has not a trace of anthropomorphized cuteness,” Rakoff wrote. “Bambi’s forest is peopled (creatured?) with characters by turns arrogant, venal, gossipy, and engaging—as flawed and varied as the cosmopolitan fauna Salten must have encountered daily in his life in Vienna.”

This show is theatrical cholent at its meatiest—all these elements and more are thrown together and left to simmer over the course of the evening. Anthropomorphized animals discuss email (and deer ticks) at a pre-World War II cafe. Bambi discusses his mother’s death in therapy. Herzl even makes a cameo appearance as Bambi’s father, in the form of a literal stag head held aloft in front of a desk lamp.

It helps to see the show through the lens of a sugar high, and this is easy to achieve: before the show, the space functions as a “coffee house,” where audience members can redeem “Bambi Bucks” for snacks (including Pop Tarts as toaster strudel—how Viennese!). Glucose levels aside, you can enjoy *BAMBI* for antic value alone, or for long afterwards try to unpack the dense piece, where the cultural references and gags build into story of intense highs and lows, of joy and fear. It’s queer, it’s Jewish, it’s transgressive, but it’s definitely a good time.

*BAMBIF*CKER/KAFFEEHAUS* runs through March 21st.

Honestly, without Wikipedia, without Youtube, I don't think I could make theater. (A conversation with Little Lord)

OCT 10, 2016 by JERRY LIEBLICH In INTERVIEWS



Little Lord in action. Photo credit Sue Kessler.

A few weeks ago I had the singular pleasure of sitting down for a cup of coffee with the masterminds of Little Lord, Michael Levinton and Laura von Holt. Michael and Laura are making the kind of difficult, dense (but still raucous and joyful) theater that I more and more find myself searching for these days. Their play-making process is time and research intensive. As I understand it, they gather an ungodly amount of material, cut it all up into pieces, put those pieces through a blender/juicer/waffle iron, and then take the digested material (now tissue-paper thin) and layer it, carefully, tissue-paper layer on tissue-paper layer on tissue-paper layer on tissue-paper layer, until they've built a cohesive, deep, intellectually and emotionally gratifying palimpsest/collage/Cornell box of a play. Hearing them speak is like listening to a highly articulate in-joking two-headed dragon who eats, breathes, and bleeds words. They can somehow make talking about the headiest of subject matter feel like doing a bit.

Below is an edited and condensed transcript of our discussion, which (like any staggeringly wide-reaching Little Lord play) ranged from everything from Pop Tarts to Diedrich Knickerbocker to existential dread to the strange and difficult process of making a strange and difficult play.

Jerry Lieblich: How did you two meet?

Culturebot – An Interview with Little Lord (<http://www.culturebot.org/2016/10/26288/honestly-without-wikipedia-without-youtube-i-dont-think-i-could-make-theater-a-conversation-with-little-lord/>)

Laura von Holt: We both went to Sarah Lawrence together. The first time I saw Michael he was on stage, he was in Cloud Nine, and he crawled up out of some girl's skirt and pulled a pube out of his mouth. Was that your direction?

Michael Levinton: No, that's in the play.

Laughter.

ML: So we knew each other in school, we were friendly, but we weren't friends. But when I started making stuff with Target Margin, which was the birth of Little Lord, I pulled Laura in. And as it took off, Laura's role has grown in it to be a co-writer, co-director, to be whatever: to be a Co.

LvH: I'm a Co.

JL: And what number show is this for you guys?

ML: Ten, depending on how you count. Let's say ten.

JL: And where in that progression do you feel like you landed on what Little Lord is?

ML: I tend to say *Pocahontas* at the Bushwick Starr, which was 2013. But then I look back on *Thirst*, and I see us at that point starting to approach things the way we approach things now.

JL: And what is that approach?

ML: Not knowing if things are going to work, not necessarily scared if they're not going to, but just going for it because we've done the work on it and we have the conviction that it should work. But *Pocahontas* was the first step of the trajectory we're on now, where we're taking this collective unconscious story and making it universal. With *Bambi*, people said that was really us growing up. And *Knickerbocker*, the new piece, is us dying.
Laughter.

JL: I'm so interested in collage as a form. And what I've found when I've tried it is I gather all this research and make all this material, and then ask myself "where's the center of gravity? What's my organizing principle?" And I always wonder whether I need that center of gravity, if I need that organizing principle. And if it's not in the text, then do I need it in production? I'm curious about how you guys manage that tension between wanting heterogeneity and centeredness.

LvH: It's tricky. Because when we've pulled all our research, and we have pages and pages of text, you do need an organizing principle, but you can't use the one that most people would use. We always have this joke about "what would the Broadway version of this play be?" And then we do something else.

ML: There are times when the actors want to know where some piece of text is from. And if it's important or it will inform the performance then I'll let them know where it's from, but for the most part it doesn't matter. We know why we put it where we put it.

Like there's a part in *Knickerbocker* where there are these slides and it's the word "Mom" and then the word "Pepsi" and then the word "Melba Toast." Which means nothing to anyone, but it means something very specific to us. If they want to know, it's because we were talking about comas and missing parts of your life like Rip Van Winkle did, and we were reading these articles about people coming out of these comas and some of the first things they say were someone asked for a Pepsi, someone asked for their Mom-

LvH: Or Melba Toast.

ML: So for us there's this emotional connection.

JL: How do you bring me the audience or the viewer into that emotional experience?

LvH: The hope is that there's echoes of things. A friend of mine who's not a theater person (she's an economist) recently told me "I like your shows, but I don't know what the fuck is happening." And I think that's ok – you're not supposed to follow a narrative. Instead it's that every single moment has a feeling, and the important thing is to feel that feeling in that moment.

ML: But you do follow a narrative. But not necessarily a traditional narrative.

LvH: You follow a trajectory, you follow a person or a story, but it's not the same as a Story story. You're not going to follow, like, *Romeo & Juliet*.

ML: Right. We make a play and it's so researched, and it's so dense with meaning, that we create different experiences for different audience members, who can follow an emotional journey. We talk about the making of our work in very physical terms. Forging new parts. Scavenging material. There's an aggressiveness to it. Where do the edges get sanded over, and where do we want that sharpness to remain?

JL: It seems like there's this double thinking that you're doing. On one hand there's the meaning of the text, and on the other hand is the more sensual, experiential thing of "how is it as a piece of music, how is it an experience in time?"

LvH: And that's the thing too when we're picking the text that's going to be on the page. It's not just picking text. It's also picking how we're doing it. We're always asking, "how can we make this mean four things at once?" The words are written down because people have to memorize them, but we'll always have about four or five ideas happening on top of them as well.

ML: We're not just collaging texts, we're collaging performance styles and different experiences of live events. And that is just as important to me as the story as it tells. Because what happens if you're watching something where everybody's facing forward and there's LED and they're dressed identically, and then it suddenly becomes this nineteenth century melodrama taken completely seriously?

JL: How do you teach your audience how to take in the kind of work you're making, where we keep being asked to take information in different ways?

LvH: We get really specific about the beginning of the show, because we want them to feel comfortable, we want them to understand that this isn't a normal play, and they're going to have to come along.

ML: Starting from the moment you first come into the space.

LvH: So that they understand that they're in a slightly different environment. And sometimes the pieces can get really emotional or dark, so we want them to know that we're taking care of them, too, it's going to be safe for them here. So that's why there's things like Pop Tarts, because it's like, ok, I know Pop Tarts. That's why for *Knickerbocker* there will be cole slaw and apple cider: "These are things I know, these are OK, so far it's been weird but OK." We lay that groundwork so the audience can come with us. It's really hospitality. You're just like "I know this is weird, we might be a little weird with funny clothes on, but it's gonna be great – look at my underwear!"

JL: I want to talk a bit about density, since that seems to be something you're playing with so much. The paradox of density to me is that you add all the colors together and you get white. And similarly, if you add all the emotions together, then if you're not attentive to it, it can seem like you're feeling nothing when you're actually feeling everything.

ML: There's this moment in the play where *Knickerbocker* is talking about the destruction of ancient cities, and we replaced one of them with a modern city as a joke. And our dramaturg warned me, saying "you know, people are going to laugh at that."

LvH: And I was like, perfect.

ML: Exactly. But it's not in there as a joke – it's in there as part of that shifting experience, where you're like "I thought I was listening to this, but wait I'm listening to *this*, and what happened to *that*?" And then suddenly you're somewhere else completely.

JL: So you can't click in and only take it in in one way.

ML: Right.

JL: I feel like there's so much art in general that's almost surgically designed to make you one thing. People try to separate out the feelings so we can see them clearly, and there's something lovely about that. But I also feel like more and more I want to practice the attentive skill of having density and having to pull things out, as opposed to having them given to me.

Culturebot – An Interview with Little Lord (<http://www.culturebot.org/2016/10/26288/honestly-without-wikipedia-without-youtube-i-dont-think-i-could-make-theater-a-conversation-with-little-lord/>)

ML: We know why we're making the decisions we're making, but I don't know how some of these things are going to play to different audiences. And night by night, maybe they'll think this is funny, maybe it's ridiculously campy, maybe it's horrifying, maybe it's all the things at the same time. But as long as we have done our work going into rehearsal to layer that, then it can be something different to everyone who sees the show. Even when there's jokes, they're not really "jokes." Even if there's something you're supposed to laugh at, it's also something you're supposed to be horrified about and then be implicated in. I love comedy, but I love jokes that can do five things at once. If it's just a joke, then I'm not interested.

LvH: If it's just a punchline, then that's boring. But if there's a wave, and then another wave, and then another wave, then that's interesting.

ML: And also when we choose material, the stuff that's incredibly obvious where it's from, or very recognizably specific, we're not interested in at all. Unless it's important for some reason that you recognize where it's from.

LvH: Sometimes when people hear something and they absolutely know what it is, then it gives them a moment of security and trust. It's one of the ways we re-earn trust in the middle of a show.

JL: Can you tell me the story of how this show came about? Why Rip Van Winkle? Why the Catskills? Walk me through the development process.

ML: I love Greek mythology. I love mythology in general, and storytelling. I'm very obsessed with ancient Greek theater. I love the structure, I love the poetry, I love the rules and the chorus and the amount of actors. And I love the idea of taking of these stories that people should know and making them about the universe, but also about something very specific that's happening right now. So I'm always really interested in finding those myths, or finding those collective, shared stories, and playing with them. Which is what *Pocahontas* was, and *Bambi*. After we did *Pocahontas*, we had this idea of doing a triptych of American founding myth plays – Pocahontas for the South, New York with Rip Van Winkle, and then maybe a Salem Witch thing, or something along those lines. So I started looking into Rip Van Winkle. Honestly, without Wikipedia, without YouTube, I don't think I could make theater.

LvH: Seriously. I don't know how we would do it.

ML: So we started looking into Rip Van Winkle, and the story is that Washington Irving attributed the story to this fictional character Diedrich Knickerbocker. Knickerbocker also wrote this history of New York, and then started having this entire life of his own, outside the control of Washington Irving. And we thought that was really interesting. So we started reading it and thinking about it and working on it years and years ago.

LvH: We actually tried to make this piece before we made *Pocahontas*. Oh my god can you imagine what that would have been like?

ML: We didn't know how to adapt Irving's language. Because he will write paragraphs that are entirely one sentence, and if you take out one word then the entire thing falls apart – the joke doesn't land, the five gagillion things it's satirizing won't land. And we ended up putting it away – I don't think we were good enough to know how to do it.

LvH: We weren't sure how to conceive of what dramatically it would be about. We just knew it was about New York and the history of New York.

ML: And Washington Irving, and myth-making in America, place-making in America, art-making in America

LvH: But that was all conceptual. There was no practical.

ML: Right.

LvH: We could have been like "here are five sentences that this play is about," but we couldn't have made a play.

ML: And so then literally the day after *Bambi* closed we were meeting with Jay Wegman [former Artistic Director of Abrons Arts Center] and we were like, "can we just remount *Bambi*?" And he was like "No. What's next?"

LvH: And we were like [*squeals in horror*]

ML: So we started working on the Knickerbocker stuff again, and over the summer of 2015 we started reading some biographies of Washington Irving, and these books about Knickerbocker and how he became a symbol of New York, and American myth, and Catskill memoirs...

LvH: We read Ecclesiastes.

ML: *Prometheus Bound*. And I think we got overwhelmed, thinking “maybe we’re still not good enough for this. Maybe we’re not old enough for this.” And we actually changed plays, and in the fall worked on a completely different play as a replacement. We even told Abrons we’re gonna do this other thing instead, Edward Lear meets Norman Lear meets King Lear. Because that’s easier, right?

LvH: It wasn’t easier. We tried.

JL: What is the physical work of making the script?

LvH: There are different phases, and for this one we went back and forth between the phases. There’s a lot of Michael and I at his apartment combing through source texts and pulling things that feel juicy.

ML: Many, many Google Docs. Google Docs that are bits that can happen, character thoughts.

LvH: Any kind of important person in any kind of mythology.

ML: Songs about New York. The document where we have the entire text of the history of New York. The document where we compare different versions of the history of New York. The document where we make choices in the history of New York but half deleted the history of New York. So the Google Drive is huge.

LvH: And we bring these things into a workshop room where we invent games and things to try to divorce some of the text from its original context. Then we discuss with people to see what it brings up for them, what references they have. Then we go back into combing through things again, collaging things, and then bringing them back in and maybe looking at a different bit of the source text, maybe a different way to collage...

ML: We try to work with people who aren’t all performers – we invite designers in, invite dramaturgs in, invite other directors in. And we’re very forward with everyone that they might not be involved with the final production, but we’re grateful to have them help us with the process. And then eventually I sit down and I put in stage directions and character names.

JL: And so what has this script turned into?

ML: It’s a hard thing to elevator pitch for. It’s Washington Irving, so it’s the father of American literature. It’s place-making, myth-making, art-making in America. It is about New York. It is about personal New Yorks. It’s about this character of Diedrich Knickerbocker, who was a pen name of Washington Irving, which is fun on all sorts of meta levels. So it’s also me as Washington Irving as Knickerbocker. Or maybe Irving as Michael as Knickerbocker. Knickerbocker was obsessed with fact, but at the same time loved the fantastical. So it’s the history of New York, but then you go up the river and there’s Rip Van Winkle and there’s Sleepy Hollow.

Then there’s all this stuff about Catskills and the idea of the Borscht Belt – Rip Van Winkle goes up the mountains and there are these Catskill Mountain gnomes who live there. And it started kind of as a joke, like “oh, it’s the Catskill Mountains, wouldn’t it be funny if there were some Jews from the middle of the century.” But then it became again this idea of immigrants coming to America, place-making in America, myth-making in America, memory-making in America. And then having that disappear, just like the Dutch culture that Knickerbocker is really obsessed with, and how that disappears, but is maybe still layered in somewhere, just like the Jews up in the mountains, which, the resorts there are all closed now.

And then in the third part of the play, which is now, our experience of New York, how are we carving out our piece of America? How are we carving out this New York for ourselves? What is our personal New York city history? Can we claim it? If in a hundred years nobody remembers us or the work that we made, does that make you want to make work even more?

LvH: Or less.

ML: So it's about many things. For a real elevator pitch, we say it's Rip Van Winkle meets *Dirty Dancing* meets Existential Horror Show.

JL: Sold!

Laughter.

JL: How is your work going to be remembered in a hundred years?

LvH: They might not ever talk about it. If they found this text a hundred years from now, they would have no idea what to do with it. I don't know how anybody could do our work without us. It's not like you can publish it and sell it to a high school, you know?

ML: I think it's a lot what Knickerbocker thinks about and fears. In writing the history of New York he keeps taking pauses to imagine himself in three hundred years where people say "that book was great, and it's all because of *you*." And the funny thing about that is that it really did happen for that character of Knickerbocker. It actually did take off. But then in Ecclesiastes there's this idea of vanity of vanities, nothing matters. Nothing matters, but not in an "oh god nothing matters, go kill yourself" kind of way, but in a "nothing matters, it's fine, there's nothing new under the sun, but you have to decide what you're going to do with that." Are you going to keep creating? Are you going to keep making?

LvH: Are you going to shout into the void? Fall into the void? Become one with the void? Run with the void?

ML: When you really realize that you won't be immortal, then what do you do now?

LvH: The shows that we make are about what they're about, but they're also about the creative process. So *Bambi* took the idea of a young Bambi exploring the amazing artistic world of Vienna, trying to make things that are really famous. But then this one is dealing with when you are making work as an adult. We spent so much of our youth trying to get the internship, and then make the play, and then get the grant, and then get the residency, you know all of this shouting into the void. And now that you've reached a certain level in your artistic career, it's less the struggle of youth and more the acknowledgment that this is what I offer.

JL: You're here. Now what?

ML: Which is also part of the reason for the title – *Now is the Time. Now is the Best Time. Now is the Best Time of Your Life*. This play is for right now. This message is for right now. In two years it might not work anymore, and that's fine.

LvH: I've been thinking a lot about legacies. I used to think it was about hitting career milestones and then being so famous that you would be unforgettable. But my dad is retiring and he's setting up his estate, and I'm realizing that legacy is something different. It's about what you leave for other people to do with what you made, not about being the thing that everyone remembers.

ML: Which is a lot of what this play is. Washington Irving, in order to publish this book, did the first viral marketing campaign. He took all these ads out in the newspaper. He pretended he was a hotel proprietor, and he said "this crazy old man was staying in my hotel, but he's gone missing, and he walked out on his bill. If anyone knows where he is, I need to be paid." Then he takes out another ad that says "he left all of these papers here and I gathered them up and showed them to my friend the librarian, and he said it's really good. So I'm going to publish it." And the public got really into it. So they published the History of New York, which is "by" this crazy old man who's gone missing like Rip Van Winkle. So he, after working and working and working, didn't have any control over how it was consumed by the public. So that's what a lot of the latter part of our play deals with. Not even Knickerbocker himself, but all of these other people writing as Knickerbocker, these clones, being like "this is the material of yours that I found, and this is how I'm going to present it." And Knickerbocker basically being like "that's not right! At all! That's not what I meant!" But also, at what point is the work no longer yours? At what point do people like Laura and Michael say "that's public domain, I can do what I need to do with it."

LvH: The thing I like about the history of New York is that the history of New York is the history of the world. There's erosion, there's the universe and how the universe was created, how mountains are created and that becomes the Catskills, and then they erode and they become the Hudson River. So the story of New York is the story of everything. And I love that idea, because New York is the "center of the world."

So the reason why Knickerbocker struggles is because he's trying to tell the history of Everything through this lens of New York. But Everything is unknowable. And that's also the thing you wrestle with as an artist – you're going to tell this one story, but every story is about everything. So how do you tell a story at all?

ML: There's a line in the play – “erosion to deposition to uplift to erosion to deposition to uplift to erosion to deposition to uplift.” Where does this type of theater fit into the grander history of theater? I don't know. Is it erosion? Is it uplift?

LvH: That's why we called it *Now is the Time*.

ML: This is what we have right now.

LvH: We've done so much work about nostalgia, about reveling in nostalgia and returning to familiar things. But I keep coming back to Ecclesiastes – everything is breath, everything is now, everything is the moment. And I think there's a maturity to acknowledging that everything is breath and that even your art is just breath.

ML: And nostalgia is bullshit.

LvH: And nostalgia is bullshit. But we still love it.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jerry Lieblich



Jerry Lieblich is a Brooklyn-based playwright. He is an alum of the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab and Smith + Tinker (HERE Arts Center), is an Edward F. Albee Foundation Fellow, and is the writerly half of the devising team Tiny Little Band. His plays include *D Deb Debbie Deborah* (Playwrights Horizons / Clubbed Thumb Superlab, Soho Rep W/D Lab), *Ghost Stories* (PRELUDE 2014), *Untitled Tech Startup CEO Piece* (THROW at The Chocolate Factory), *Nostalgia is a Mild Form of Grief* (the claque| Reads, Pipeline Theater Company), *Eudaemonia* (not just 3 New Plays), and *1927* (Ars Nova ANT Fest). He is also a published scientist, and used to work at a zoo. www.tinylittleband.com