



For Those About to Mock-Rock... Don't Call Them Spinal Tap! The Theatre Collective Banana Bag & Bodice Love Myths and Beer.

By Eliza Bent
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Banana Bag & Bodice are hoping to conclude their new production with a financially-rewarding magic trick. At the end of the theater group's show, which currently has 19 other possible endings, the audience would reach into their pockets and find the money they'd paid for their ticket, making the show free. Charitable magicians willing to share trade secrets please contact them.

It's not the only magic BB&B hope to brew with their new show, *The Fall and Rise of the Rising Fallen*, which begins April 26 at P.S. 122. Constructed around an imaginary rock group called the Rising Fallen, the piece chronicles (sort of) the band's ascent to fame, their six-year hiatus, and how they reformed, toured Scandinavia, and lived on an oil rig off the Faroe Islands. Don't dismiss it as an attempt to rechannel *Spinal Tap*, though. "It's been done so well already," BB&B performer Jessica Jelliffe sighs, "why would we want to try and re-create that?" Playwright Jason Craig concurs, "The music industry makes fun of itself enough already."

Banana Bag & Bodice, which Jelliffe and Craig founded in 1999, does not cater to standard theater practice. Rather, they hope to redefine traditional notions of performance through their original text and music, and by embracing intelligent irreverence and skilled buffoonery. *Time Out New York* called their show *The Sewers*—a post-apocalyptic romp in meta-madness presented at the Ontological-Hysteric Theater last year—"an underground mind-fuck." The troupe rotates between San Francisco, New York, and Dublin, and have been compared to avant-garde groups like Radiohole and Collapsible Giraffe, who have a similarly unorthodox, collective approach to theater-making.

As BB&B rehearse at the Collapsible Hole in Williamsburg, actor Peter Blomquist's velvety vocals lend themselves to some seriously hilarious—and hilariously serious—songs. Without a hint of the detached irony one might expect in this mock-rock arena, Blomquist, who also composed, approaches each song with total conviction. Lyrics like:

"I met a dog on the way to a tilt-a-whirl" and "I just finished telling her I thought everyone has cubes over their . . . heads" become deftly funny and strangely sad. With the Rising Fallen evoking Violent Femmes and Talking Heads, Blomquist's rich voice and dashing good looks would make any punk-prone teen weak in the knees.

The rest of the band melds together nicely, echoing the ethos of BB&B. A highly collaborative process is at work inside Collapsable Hole (a space that has the feel of your friend's garage where the parents never check in). A spirited conversation is underway between cast and crew. They lounge in sweaters and scarves, sipping tea and swigging back beers. One brave soul slurps a "Gin Pickle"—the official cast drink, which consists of gin, a spicy pickle, and a mysterious grasslike garnish. I try one. It tastes like a swamp.

"We decided to make a show about musicians, so we had to learn how to rock," Craig drawls as he climbs onstage. Some of the band members are new to music. Jelliffe only picked up drumsticks four months ago, making her playing particularly impressive. Their music is tight, and despite small spats over timing and tempo, an underlying current of camaraderie pervades the room. The songs, and the way they're played, have a strangely familiar feel, sweeping even the most casual of listeners into a Zenlike trance. And though some numbers burn like a Gin Pickle going down, they somehow manage to warm the belly.

"You see, we're trying to make myths here," Craig says after rehearsal. The lore of the Rising Fallen mixes with BB&B's own history. As one song ends the group bursts into chatter, and for a moment it's unclear if they're acting or just talking—it's hard to tell where the characters end and the actors begin. Though the piece's scene chronology seems murky, one senses everything will eventually fall into place. Morgan Pecelli, former managing director of the Ontological-Hysteric who's also working on this show, describes BB&B's process as "disciplined anarchism" that "forces each element of their work to have equal and precious weight." Not surprisingly, group discussions follow each scene. "We usually listen to whoever's loudest," Jelliffe jokes.

But in this happy chaos one voice emerges often—director Mallory Catlett's. "Let's try you on the treadmill," she suggests to one actor. The treadmill, which sits at the back of the sparse wooden set, provides a wonderful whirring soundtrack, underscoring scenes and songs. Though actors playfully bicker over how a scene should go, Catlett's suggestions provide a sculpting force to what might otherwise just be mayhem. In one scene, Blomquist performs a strange series of movements while Heather Peroni (whose character Ada Dick plays keyboards) narrates the maddening appeal of the lead singer. Blomquist whittles his dance down to one sensually twirled hand, so that when Peroni concludes, "Maybe you could all use a bit of the obvious right now," the whole group joins in on the gesture. Watching them jive and gesticulate, it's hard not to envy the onstage fun.

The Irish Times has described BB&B's work as "wonderfully theatrical, superbly performed, at times hilarious, erotic, physical and very funny." P.S. 122 artistic director Vallejo Gantner calls them "rigorous, intelligent, and deeply thoughtful." Their playwright friend Alec Duffy remembers seeing early BB&B performances in San Francisco and being attracted to their "unlikely mixture of Old World theater—buffoonery and flatulent, grotesque, slap-down-the-sides-of-the-medieval-roving-stage-on-wheels-and-put-on-a-show—with the coolness, irony and lackadaisical quality of postmodern performance." He adds in an e-mail, "There are these lovely moments in their work when you finally get to see the beauty of human nature, or the fragility."

Following the rehearsal, I accompany Craig and Catlett into Manhattan for an after-party for Rotozaza, a British theater group they like that had been performing at P.S.122. As we walk, we discuss the frustration of funding. "We're not trying to help people through a social message," Craig explains. "We're making stuff that appeals to us and people of a like-minded aesthetic. We're not a moralistic theater company. So it's really hard to write a mission statement with that in mind." Art for art's sake doesn't foot the bill.

Outside the Lower East Side club the Box, Craig and Catlett greet their friends, but none of the Brits have their passports to prove their ages, so we wind up at the smaller, quieter Lotus. "What's with your group's name, anyway?" someone wonders. I'd asked the same question earlier in the evening. Like rock veterans, Craig and Jelliffe described the story behind the name: For a Halloween outing they wore fat suits with bodices, and Jelliffe carried a handbag with a banana peeking out. A snapshot from that night, coupled with the urgent need for a press image, produced the group's alliterative name. "It's pretty dorky," they admitted, but like any good magic trick, they pull it off gracefully.