



## Science fiction double feature: **Banana Bag & Bodice crams itself into Space//Space.**

*The arrestingly strange Off-Off Broadway troupe mixes sci-fi and low tech for its latest performance installation at the Collapsible Hole.*

By Helen Shaw

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It is exactly the Bushwick artists' loft you expect, crammed with the typical Brooklynite decorations: stag's head, plaster rooster, Kafka postcard. There's pasta on the stove for anyone who wants some. The painted tin ceilings are high, so despite the lack of air-conditioning, the requisite cat ambling to and fro hasn't yet started panting. Of course, there is one little thing that's a trifle unexpected—wedged into one corner, totally dominating the room, looms a massive steel-and-Plexiglas space pod.

This is the home of partners Jessica Jelliffe and Jason Craig, animating minds of the avant-weird company [Banana Bag & Bodice](#), best known for their 2009 nerdcore rock show *Beowulf: A Thousand Years of Baggage*. The last time you saw playwright-performer Craig, he was probably sleevelessly roaring into a microphone while stalking Jelliffe (Grendel's mother) across the tables at Joe's Pub. Now they bounce sweatily around their little pod-within-a-loft, rehearsing his goofy psychodrama *Space//Space*, the gonzo theatrical love child of *Solaris* and *Dumb & Dumber*.

At the moment, they are wearing, on an extremely warm day, giant full-body plushie suits and matching caps and beards. (Craig's facial hair is natural.) Confined to the tiny pod for the entire show, the two play a set of spacegoing twins, a kind of technical crew on some undefined, infinite voyage. Bickering between the brothers turns to stranger things: Their pod includes provisions for sustenance (a bottomless supply of sandwiches) and possible alien contact (a bottomless sound-library), but it doesn't account for every eventuality. Time bends weirdly; so does gender.

*Space//Space* starts as an absurdist, Beckettian comedy, but it becomes a wrenching domestic drama, though the transition does require one character to change sex.

Director Mallory Catlett, a known perfectionist, is having Jelliffe practice a move, minutely and effortfully. Jelliffe's smile starts to get a little loopy. She's sweating bullets; she happens to be six months pregnant. Of course, this in no way interferes with the trio's obsessive attention to detail, particularly when it comes to the refinement of Craig's character's bizarro stand-up comedy.

Today he keeps coming back to a cracked Borscht Belt routine. “I just wanted to get the bangin’-my-wife joke right!” he complains. They repeat it what seems like 50 times.

Some of this ultradetailed rigor has worked against them—earlier workshop versions of *Space//Space* looked so polished, many assumed the show was done. “We’re worried people will go, ‘Oh, we’ve seen that already,’” says Jelliffe. “We want them to know this is the first finished version.” The spaceship hasn’t changed, but much else has. For one, Jelliffe’s real baby bump has obviated the costume designer’s need for the old bicycle-helmet-under-the-shirt trick at one moment in the show.

The furry costumes are new; so is the onslaught of knock-knock jokes punctuated by composer Dave Malloy’s sample-rich score. “Jason thought it was too dark,” explains Catlett. “So we’re trying to embrace the absurdity, to purge anything we think is too logical.”

But while *Space//Space* orbits further out into the absurdist reaches, the text actually spirals, simultaneously, in toward autobiography. Jelliffe’s pregnancy is just one case of life imitating art. Claustrophobia has been a hallmark of the pair’s relationship. Jelliffe and Craig got together while on a three-and-a-half-month children’s-theater tour. “We did the whole East Coast, just the two of us in a van,” recalls Craig. “The original design for the pod looked like that trailer. So yes, there’s a lot of overlap. It all starts subliminally, and then your real life always comes up and comes out.”

“The show actually came out of not being pregnant, and avoiding it and not talking about having a kid,” adds Jelliffe. “We finished doing *Beowulf* and I wanted it to just be the two of us, so I asked him to write it for just two.” She turns to Craig, accusingly. “Then it went weird and dark, and you’re dead and I’m pregnant!” The author shrugs furry shoulders. “Happy anniversary?”

Now the couple is moving into yet another tiny space, Williamsburg’s Collapsible Hole. “It’s our home,” avers Craig simply. Banana Bag’s first New York hit, *Panel.Animal*, happened there, and Jelliffe has been happy to note that the pod fits snugly into its confines. “People are amazing,” she says. “They have imaginations...they fill in the space for us.” There is, of course, another concern. As the two of them swelter and get back to work, they both ponder the air-conditioning at the Hole. “What should you tell people?” asks Craig, before answering himself. “Tell them: Space is cold.”

**[Space//Space](#) is at Collapsible Hole through July 1.**