



STAGE SCENES

Monster mash

SINGLE THREAD SHOWS, ALUNA THEATRE'S CLOTHING SWAP FUNDER, ARTHUR MILLER'S THE CRUCIBLE

BY JON KAPLAN AND GLENN SUMI

Mammalian Diving Reflex's Darren O'Donnell has been into kids' plays for years.

But unlike theatre-for-young-audiences companies, he's been making

plays with children rather than for children, among them *Free Advice From A Teenager* and the international touring production *Haircuts By Children*.

As part of Harbourfront Centre's Fresh Ground series, O'Donnell becomes solo playwright for a show aimed at young audiences and their parents, the October-appropriate *Monster Makers*.

The interactive production – yes, audiences of all ages still have a hand in shaping each performance – involves a scientist (John Caffery) who tries but fails to build a scary monster (Daniel Nimmo), while a photographer (Amy Lam) captures his experiment for the cover of a major magazine.

In the process of the storytelling, the show asks questions about the anxiety associated with failure and how it colours people's lives regardless of their age.

"It's been a real learning curve," admits O'Donnell, "because our development process requires viewers, and getting an audience of young people is difficult when you're being openly edgy. Questioning norms is hard when you get a lot of pushback from parents, so we haven't gone there."

But one thing O'Donnell had no problem with was making the show participatory. How much will kids do in front of other kids?

"Lots," he says, laughing. "At one point the audience takes the monster out of the theatre into the world, and as part of the script he runs away from them. We had to be careful to get him away as quickly as possible and along a safe route, since we discovered that kids will run into traffic to follow a creature they've fallen for."

"It reminds me of young theatre artists making forays into guerrilla

theatre; public performance is a surprisingly good way to do interventionist theatre. Breaking rules in public is still a thrill, both for artists and audiences.”

The idea for the show began when O’Donnell was in India and working on developing a solo show for himself with the help of children outside Mumbai.

“After two weeks, we found that the most fun everyone had was putting makeup on me and parading me as a monster through the streets.”

Monster Makers has developed since then, with test performances in Australia and at the Magnetic North Festival here in Canada.

Working with children during the past few years has been an eye-opener for O’Donnell, who previously wrote and performed in such untraditional adult theatre pieces as *White Mice* and [boxhead].

“We can talk about racism in a show, for instance, but it’s more useful to work with it and ‘fix’ it in the show. As creators, we can choose to be either authoritarian or anarchistic; working non-hierarchically has proven to be the most productive way of developing and sharing a show.”

But he hasn’t left grown-up audiences behind. One project in the works for Mammalian Diving Reflex is *The Best Sex I’ve Ever Had*, created with people over 65.

“Of all the plays I’ve written, *Monster Makers* is the most concerned with character, drama and theatrical conflict,” notes O’Donnell. “At the same time, like all the company’s other shows, it acknowledges the audience in any way possible. That’s been one of our goals from the beginning.”