

EYE WEEKLY.COM

THEATRE



Leeman Kessler, star of *Monstrous Invisible*

Sci-fi lo-fi

BY PAUL GALLANT April 14, 2010 21:04

The Banana Festival

Featuring Leeman Kessler, Tanya Lynne, Merritt Crews, Hannah Barnett-Kemper, Kevin Robinson, Adrianna Prosser, Tim Nussey, Melissa Zaccardelli and Jack Morton.

Written by Jordan Hall, Stephen Near, Tasha Gordon-Solmon and D.J.

Sylvis. Directed by Laura Roald, Martin Chodorek, Lindsey Alston and

Phil Rickaby. Presented by Monkeyman Productions. \$10. Runs

Apr 16, 17, 23, 24, 8pm. Apr 17 &

24, 10:30pm. Imperial Pub. 54

Dundas E. 416-737-1267.

www.monkeymanproductions.com.

D.J. Sylvis started out as a Batman fan. With Superman, you had to believe in an alien civilization. With Spider-Man, it was entirely unlikely a radioactive spider would cause such a dramatic transformation. But with Batman, hey, anybody could learn that stuff. As he grew older, Sylvis' penchant for superheroes progressed to Dungeons and Dragons and Star Trek. By his teens, he was a full-fledged card-carrying geek.

Now, geekdom has earned a certain level of respect in the last decade or so. The philosophical trappings of Star Trek and Buffy the Vampire Slayer have become acceptable not only for widespread consumption, but for academic research papers. This year, the Academy nominated not one but two sci-fi films for Best Picture, both of which are generally acknowledged as having grappled with serious themes (District 9 did so with ingenuity, Avatar with a ham-fist the size of Jupiter).

But still. All the artistic forms that have comfortably absorbed the caped crusaders, monsters, wizards and space travel of Planet Nerd have one thing in common: they all tend to be enjoyed alone, in the dark, usually on a screen or on pulpy paper. Live

theatre, already colonized by its own breed of misfits, has a propensity for real-time action and low budgets that seem a poor match for geek fascinations. You have to go out in public to see theatre, which is no easy chore for folks who have trouble leaving their parents' basement.

But Sylvis, a US transplant who moved to Toronto for love, thinks geek culture and the stage don't have to inhabit alternative universes. His Monkeyman Productions, founded in 2008 to "speak in

the language of an audience that has most truly found its voice in the meme-ridden YouTube-obsessed depths of the internet,” is producing the first-ever Banana Festival of four new short plays this month. What’s kept the two worlds apart so far is not some kryptonite anti-matter, but a misunderstanding.

“If you went to high school, you read a few Shakespeare plays or Arthur Miller plays or whatever,” says Sylvis, “and you assume that’s what all theatre is like. But we’re trying to change that so that sci-fi fans know there is live performance going on that appeals to them in the same way that books and movies do.”

It’s true that sci-fi has long used aliens and super-villains as metaphors for more existential concerns, concerns that are well-served by live actors on a stage. It’s just that the genre has more window-dressing. Sylvis’ own contribution to the festival is about the breakdown of a superhero’s marriage. Sure, the story involves world-in-jeopardy derring-do, but the key emotional twists and turns are drawn more from breakups in Sylvis’ own past than any comic book.

The Second Last Man on Earth, written by Jordan Hall, is described as “an incredibly awkward post-Doomsday version of Three’s Company.” Tasha Gordon-Solmon’s BillyJoelTookMetotheProm.com is a less speculative story of two celebrity-obsessed adolescents. While mainstream theatre may have elitist tendencies, its purveyors usually strive to soften them. The work at The Banana Festival is not so afraid of making insider references.

In a live venue, Sylvis hopes that an extra layer of pop-culture knowingness will create a familial bond among audience members. “We use the kind of jokes we think are funny. We don’t dumb it down. There’s always some level at which you’re appreciating it, so if you’re an insider, you’re going to be laughing at different things.”

The key creative challenge, though, is not so much connecting with audiences but managing the special effects. Theatre offers no post-production computer-generated cast of thousands. If the characters are to be anything but earthbound, the writing, acting and directing must do the heavy lifting.

“As a writer, it’s a challenge,” admits Sylvis. “But we’re always implying things in theatre. We’ll imply flying. We’ll imply zombies. It’s not necessarily that we’re asking audiences to do something new. We’re just asking them to suspend a little more disbelief than they usually do.”

Email us at: LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM or send your questions to EYEWEEKLY.COM
625 Church St, 6th Floor, Toronto M4Y 2G1