

**MICHAEL KENNARD**

**COACHING  
and  
MENTORSHIP  
REVIEWS**

## **In this comic gem, meet the ultimate outsiders: Rat Academy, a Fringe review**

Posted on [August 22, 2023](#) by [Liz Nicholls](#)



Dayna Lea Hoffmann and Katie Yoner in Rat Academy, Batrabbitt Productions. Pphoto supplied.

***Rat Academy*** (Stage 23, Holy Trinity Anglican Church)

**By Liz Nicholls, [12thnight.ca](#)**

Face it, cats have had their day (and night and decades) onstage, ingratiating themselves with the public. What of the rat, the ultimate outsider, marginalized, up against a hostile world for their very survival, especially in Alberta? Everyday's an existential crisis when you're a rat.

In *Rat Academy*, a captivating, wonderfully imagined clown show from the duo of Dayna Lea Hoffmann and Katie Toner, we meet two, in an alley. Ever seen a rat shrug? Fingers (Hoffman), the scrappier, more street savvy of the pair, glares suspiciously at us: "why are they in my house?." Let's just say it's not his (pronouns up for grabs) first block party.

## REPORT RAT SIGHTINGS



Rat Academy, Batrabbit Productions, Edmonton Fringe 2023

Shrimp (Yoner) is white, a bit fluffy, rabbity (to mix our species metaphors), dazed, a veritable Candide of a rodent — an escapee from the lab out in the world and (dangerously) ready to make friends among us.

Shrimp will have none of it. He undertakes his pal's worldly education, with props at hand in the garbage can and pilfered cheese "for special occasions." Forget self-esteem therapy; this isn't rodent Beckett, for god's sake. This is practical paws-on pedagogy from the street (er, the alley)I , with lessons like How 2 Steal (a comic classic, from the Three Stooges tradition), How 2 Sniff, How 2 Fight.

The worldly vs. innocent dynamic is very funny, expertly established and sustained (along with rat voices). And so is the way the characters interact with the audience. Shrimp is a distractible student, who keeps flunking every night school course at the academy, and we laugh sympathetically. Fingers, the fierce one, on a short fuse getting ever shorter, is increasingly exasperated with his protégé — and with us, for our reactions. The more he hears the Awww of cuteness, the more he rolls his eyes. "O my god. Come on!"

Both Hoffmann and Toner are responsive; these rats are light on their feet, and quick on the uptake. There's rat shit, true, but nobody sings *Memory*. The interview section, in which our rodents venture into the audience with a magic 8-ball, is a riot. I know you'll have questions, about friction in the teacher-student relationship, etc. In a world that doesn't give a rat's ass about outsiders, can the rat demi-monde transcend personality conflict? C'mon, see the show. It's a masterly little comic gem.

## **A riotous black comedy from Colleen Murphy at Theatre Network: Titus Bouffonius is all good unwholesome fun.** **A review**

Posted on January 31, 2020 by Liz Nicholls



**By Liz Nicholls,**

It's a rare evening at the theatre that gets you laughing out loud, gives you a good smack upside the head — and makes you wonder later whether you might have dreamed the whole thing. AND whether you should have your mind checked out for major structural cracks.

There are comedies that are black; there are comedies that are very black. And then there's *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*: it's riotously black. All good unwholesome fun. And yours for a Theatre Network ticket.

A 2015 commission from Vancouver's Rumble Theatre, it's by the Canadian star playwright Colleen Murphy (*Pig Girl*, *Armstrong's War*, *The December Man*). Which should be a hint that it'll be theatrically inventive and taboo-resistant. It's a play-within-

a-play, a bit like a cross between the inmates of the insane asylum putting on a historical drama in *Marat/Sade* and the rustics who put on a show for the courtiers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *Titus Bouffonius* is what happens when a ragtag band of misfit outsiders with nothing to lose, no budget to speak of, and no proprieties to uphold are let loose on Shakespeare's blood-spattered, grisly early revenge tragedy *Titus Andronicus*.

These eager amateurs in the theatre have chosen it for impeccable scholarly reasons: of all the plays in the sacred canon, "it's the one with the most murders." What happens is a madcap black comedy containing assorted neck-breakings, rape, beheadings, crucifixions, dismemberments and maimings, infanticides, cannibalism – and that's just the stuff lifted from *Titus Andronicus*. (Which, by the way, is A Timeless Classic since it's by the greatest playwright who ever lived and also wrote *Romeo and Juliet*). The style of choice is bouffon (a macabre and physically distorted clown sub-species of the genus Euro). They're outliers who enter the world with a jaundiced eye and a spirit of mockery. And the bouffons of Bradley Moss's go-for-the-gusto Theatre Network production have been coached by a celebrated master of the genre, Michael Kennard, aka Mump, of the horror clown duo Mump and Smoot fame.

Since the homeless arrive at destitution for diverse reasons, each of the five characters taking on roles in *Titus Bouffonius* has particular sources for their thespian urges. All five, however, are diligent from the outset about thanking the taxpayers for their \$500 arts grant to put on the play.



Robert Benz in *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. Photo by Ryan Parker.

The cast enters, sidling, in a misshapen clump. And although they return to ensemble configuration to deliver morbid odes to the gods (score by composer Darrin Hagen), that's the last tiptoeing that will happen in an evening when the mounting body count is tallied on a clothesline of tiny corpses. They're led by Robert Benz as Sob, the aging urchin ex-con who stars as Titus, a father of an ever-dwindling supply of 25 sons. "I love the smell of an open tomb...."

Titus's nemesis Tamora Queen the Goths is played by snarly Spark who's played by Bobbi Goddard as a toxified goth party girl (decked out by designer Tessa Stamp). She self-identifies as a "recovering mother" since "I'm trying to recover my two kids from fuckin' Children's Aid." Boots (Helen Belay), a "recovering alcoholic" with a psycho glint, plays Aaron, the relentlessly evil Moor in *Titus Andronicus*.



Marguerite Lawler in The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography.

Marguerite Lawler plays Leap as a kind of toxic kewpie, a sex worker with tattered romantic dreams who plays Titus's daughter Lavinia. She has a horrifying time of it in Shakespeare: she gets raped, then has her hands cut off and her tongue cut out so she can't accuse her attackers, Tamora's sons Donny and Kevin.

At the worst possible moment Leap, who's playing a character getting divested of major body parts in the shredder of a plot, makes a little set speech about violating her personal body space with unwanted touching. Yes, this is a play where the bouffons make fun of everything sacred, including off-the-rack political correctness.

As Fink (a "recovering kid because my mother left when I was five"), Hunter Cardinal has the double fun of playing two brothers. One is the pumped-up replacement emperor and the other more of a chill dude, with the expertly timed miscues that constantly leave him stranded as the narration rolls on.



Robert Benz in *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography

In the chaos of misplaced entrances, wrongly timed props and near-misses, and the tangle of prompts and improvised lines and insertions from the wrong play, a story with a high mortality rate, especially for kids, emerges (thank you sweet swan of Avon). The expendable younger generation is represented onstage by a battalion of small cheap plastic dolls who meet grisly ends. You know that the gore quotient is hitting red alert when the front rows surrounding the stage in Moss's production are equipped with a splatter shield and bibs. Ooo, I do love a play with a good splatter shield (a lot of ketchup gives up the ghost in this show, just saying).

It all happens on a set (by Tessa Stamp, lit by Scott Peterson), as crooked as the characters' teeth and apparently thrown together from rejected junk found in a dumpster behind the Roxy, according to participants.

From the macabre hilarity — which comes with a “trigger warning” for the traumatized: “be warned that our performance may contain a few moments of interpretive dance” — pulses a question from a smart and witty playwright. And it's maybe THE question of our time (along with how on earth we choose our leaders so disastrously). What are you supposed to do with vast repositories of grief and rage? How do you contain the uncontainable?



Robert Benz in *The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius*, Theatre Network. Photo by Ian Jackson, Epic Photography.

A sense of absurdity will only take you so far. Titus says the answer is revenge. And more revenge. But “revenge is a snake that eats its tail and shits it out then eats that same shit and shits it out again and again and again. It must taste good.”

You have to be up to it. But in an age with an appetite for vague disapproval and a diminished and dwindling capacity for outrage, it’s kind of heartening to feel the jolt of a shock coursing through the veins of a play — and your own. “We chose this play because it’s about grief, vengeance and the relish of murdering children — your own and other people’s,” say the bouffons by way of introduction. And the ante gets upped.

It takes a pack of first-rate death clowns to follow through. Fun fun fun (thank you taxpayers).

#### **REVIEW**

#### ***The Society For The Destitute Presents Titus Bouffonius***

**Theatre:** Theatre Network

**Written by:** Colleen Murphy

**Directed by:** Bradley Moss

**Starring:** Robert Benz, Helen Belay, Hunter Cardinal, Bobbi Goddard, Marguerite Lawler

**Where:** Roxy on Gateway, 8529 Gateway Blvd.

**Running:** through Feb. 16