

MUMP AND SMOOT

**ANYTHING
REVIEWS**

HPR review: Clowns of horror show some heart in Anything



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GREG SOUTHAM / CALGARY HERALD



In terms of branding, the best thing that has ever happened to Mump and Smoot was being dubbed ‘The Clowns of Horror.’

Apparently, it wasn’t intentional. The tag line came from an early review and Mump and Smoot, a.k.a. Michael Kennard and John Turner, embraced it more than 20 years ago, giving themselves a nice marketing hook for an act that probably wasn’t particularly easy to market.

After all “existential clowns who don’t speak English” doesn’t have the same ring to it.

The poster for Mump and Smoot's newest creation, *Anything*, plays it up with an emphasis on blood-dripping typography. There's also the obligatory 'not for children' disclaimer whenever and wherever the show is being publicized. Is it for the squeamish? Well, probably not. On the other hand, anyone thinking they were walking into a gorefest on Friday night at the Martha Cohen Theatre, where Mump and Smoot unleashed their latest creation as part of the High Performance Rodeo, would have been in for a surprise.

Because while there were more than a few moments of violence and, yes, some trademark dismemberment, these Clowns of Horror are more funny than scary and show flashes of heart far more often than blood.

That's not to say that wasn't something unsettling about the premise. With spooky music and a willowy, deathly spectre named Knooma (Jade Benoit) creeping about the stage, the early goings find our hapless heroes trapped in a budgetless, *Waiting for Godot*-type netherworld with only a bare light bulb and each other for company. From there, Mump and Smoot are put in various scenarios they have to either escape or endure.

Certainly, these clowns negotiate darker terrain than your average birthday-party stock. There's death, guilt, violence, fear, panic. But it's all tempered with the genuine charisma — and comedic chops — of Kennard and Turner, who have polished Mump and Smoot into a first-rate comedy team in the tradition of Laurel and Hardy. Snoop is childlike, often frightened, overly enthusiastic and not particularly bright. Mump can be mean, but is more often exasperated as only those who aren't quite as smart as they think they are can get. So while the two may find themselves in novel situations — stuck in an easily escapable cage, competing against each other in a Calgary-friendly horsey contest, for instance — there's a certain old-school feel to their interplay. That extends into the anything-goes audience participation, where game individuals are fished out of the crowd for certain tasks and usually end up feeling the suffocating appreciation of Smoot and withering judgment of Mump. One of the segments takes place in a doctor's office. You can't get more old-school Vaudevillian than that.

The best, and arguably most mean-spirited, segment involves our heroes competing for a trophy on their horses (actually a majestic unicorn for Mump and easily spooked donkey for Smoot.) In terms of laughs and emotions, it's a showstopper with Kennard and Turner showing off their impressive slapstick skills.

There's nothing else quite as arresting in the show and *Anything* has trouble keeping the momentum. The climax, while inventively violent, is a little underwhelming in comparison, probably because it's not quite as apocalyptic as it is meant to be. But by that point, Mump and Smoot have already won us over and, with a show that clocks in at only 70 minutes, end the night a long way away from wearing out their welcome.

Review: Mump and Smoot in *Anything* with Knooma runs until Feb. 1 at the Martha Cohen Theatre as part of the High Performance Rodeo.
Three and a half out of five stars.

Mump and Smoot's Creators Discuss the Clowns of Horror

Michael Kennard and John Turner on blood and languages.
BY JULIA WILLIAMS

January 19, 2015

Mump and Smoot, notorious and beloved clown characters created by Canadians Michael Kennard and John Turner, have been performing across North America for more than two decades. They've been described as delightful and nightmarish, sweet and demented, and have been compared with famous duos Laurel and Hardy and Vladimir and Estragon.

We had a conversation with Kennard (Mump) and Turner (Smoot) as they prepared to open their latest full-length show, *Mump and Smoot in Anything With Knooma* at **Alberta Theatre Projects** this month.

How do you explain Mump and Smoot's enduring popularity?

John Turner It's totally character- and relationship-based work. It's based on love and fun. I don't think that sort of material ever gets tired. Even when we go to our darkest places, it's still based in fundamental, universal issues.

Why are you the "clowns of horror?"

J.T. Right at the beginning, the press defined us as horror clowns or clowns of horror. Once it was coined, the term just exploded. It's the thing everybody thinks of. We got to Edmonton [Fringe] and, at first, they wouldn't let us perform in our assigned theatre that first year because they'd heard we used more than a gallon of blood for each show. But we reassured them and were allowed to go ahead.

Michael Kennard But it wasn't like we didn't like being horror clowns — we loved it. We liked the juxtaposition of it.

Why are Mump and Smoot shows so bloody?

J.T. We're both a little subversive. We wanted to reinvent clowning, and we were both big horror fans before we even met. We wanted to make it as exciting as possible.

Why do you create your own props?

M.K. It started out of necessity. You can't just go out and buy an arm-stretcher, so we had to figure out how to make one. Plus, we were producing shows on \$1,000, so we did everything ourselves. Lighting design, props — everything. We loved being hands-on, so, when you go on stage, there's a feeling that everything's been created from you and your imagination.

Does Ummonian [the gibberish language spoken in Ummo, the parallel universe Mump and Smoot inhabit] have linguistic rules?

M.K. No, but there are set words for certain things. "*Poodugs et sloobs*" is spaghetti and wine. A lot of the gibberish words we come up with are based on feeling. If you say "*poodugs et sloobs*" and think "spaghetti and wine," it actually feels like "spaghetti and wine."

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THEATRE REVIEWS



Mump and Smoot In Anything (With Knooma)



John Turner (Smoot) and Michael Kennard (Mump)
Credit: Ian Jackson

At The York Theatre until May 6, 2017
604-251-1363/thecultch.com

Posted April 29, 2017

Ah, Mump. Oh, Smoot. Welcome back to Planet Earth. Where the hell have you been? And hell is the operative word. Michael Kennard (Mump) and John Turner (Smoot) are the dark clowns that haunt your nightmares. Mump is creepy and scary and mean; Smoot is endearing and sweet but weird. Together they could be the test tube offspring of Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett.

Who can fail to be reminded of *Waiting for Godot* at the very beginning of *Mump and Smoot in Anything (with Knooma)* when Mump and Smoot sit on a couple of trunks obviously waiting for god knows what? They look around, sigh. Smoot fidgets like a two-year old in Walmart. Mump frowns at him, makes that 'quit-it' patting gesture: both hands, palms down. They appear to be trapped in an undefined space – maybe even on a stage at The York? And that's where Kafka comes in: what have they done to deserve this? Why Mump? Why Smoot? Why here? Why now?



Michael Kennard and John Turner
Credit: Ian Jackson

A cult classic that returns to Vancouver not often enough, Kennard and Turner are directed by Karen Hines (Poschy's Lips and, recently, Crawlspace). Hines admits to her obsession with, in her words, "these two beautiful freaks" and says she's "waiting to get bored so I can be released at last from this exquisite compulsion."

That will never happen. Turner and Kennard are boundlessly creative and you will wonder from what part of their brains do these wacky, existential ideas come?

Mump and Smoot don't actually come from hell; they live in a parallel universe, a place called Ummo (pronounced ooh-moh). They worship a god called Ummo and they speak Ummonian, a gibberish peppered with recognizable words like "fourth wall", "save yourselves" and "I don't give a (gibberish, gibberish) fuck".

Eventually, in this show, the fidgety Smoot, who has been warned not to pull the chain on a standing lamp, can resist no longer. He pulls the chain. Explosion. Smoke. Flashing lights. Electrical storm. Scary music by composer Greg Morrison.

In the next scene, Mump and Smoot are in a cage out of which they can obviously get free but haven't figured it out.



Michael

Kennard and John Turner
Credit: Ian Jackson

Knooma (Jade Benoit) of the title is a sort of Angel of Death. Swaddled in flowing white layers, head wrapped in a white turban, she seems to float in and appears to be calling the shots – although it's possible she's mostly there to make the scene changes from The Escape, during which Mump and Smoot make a hilarious escape with the help of an audience 'volunteer', to The Romp and The Remedy.

The Romp is possibly the funniest horse-and-rider sequence I have ever seen. It feels a lot like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza; trumpets blare, conquistador-ish Spanish music fills the air and Mump and Smoot emerge from the wings on horseback. They perform a military tattoo, with their 'horses' crisscrossing, sidestepping and eventually jumping over a trunk. Smoot's horse is more like a raggedy old mule while Mump's is white and proud and draped in blue silk.

Mump is the bully; Smoot is the bullied. Mump gets booed; Smoot gets cheered. God help you if you crinkle your candy-wrapper; Mump will skewer you. Don't laugh at inappropriate places; Mump will scowl at you. And for heaven's sake, don't be late; Mump will destroy you.

There are blood and guts – pulled out of Smoot’s dead mule like a string of wieners – and severed limbs. Don’t take children; they’ll never sleep again.

Mump and Smoot are an acquired taste. Legions of theatregoers have acquired it as was evident when Mump and Smoot prayed to Ummono for their salvation. A surprising number of patrons joined in.



Michael Kennard and John Turner
Credit: Ian Jackson

My prayers, as a child, were never answered when I asked for a monkey. I'm going to switch to Ummo and see if I have better luck. Might change 'monkey' to 'a secure lease on my cottage'. So, with Turner and Kennard's permission, I print the words here and urge you to join in the prayer when you see the show – assuming you have an adventuresome spirit and are okay with a dead horse on stage.

Arms raised in front, palms forward, bending at the waist, all together now:
"Ohno Moko Ummo, Ohno Moko Ummo, Ohno Moko Ummo,
Smullo, Smullo, Smullo,
Clippity, Clop, Clop, Clop, Clop."

Check out the video if you dare: <https://vimeo.com/128625601>