

MUMP AND SMOOT

**FERNO
REVIEWS**

Los Angeles Times

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 6, 1994

'Ferno' Makes a Gesture of Understanding

THEATER REVIEW

By NANCY CHURNIN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

LA JOLLA—A tale of two clowns: the tall and lean Mump, with shiny blue tights, blue high-tops and a long blue horn on his head; and the short and squat Smoot, with baggy red shorts, red high-tops and two smaller red horns on his head. But it's not just the clothes and the bright red noses that distinguish Michael Kennard's Mump and John Turner's Smoot from Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello and George and Gracie.

The Toronto-based team, now wreaking havoc in the West Coast premiere of "Mump & Smoot in 'Ferno'" at the La Jolla Playhouse's Mandell Weiss Forum, brings a fresh twist to the form by eliminating language as we know it. They speak gibberish—supposedly the language of Ummonian from the land of Ummo—but make themselves understood by gesture, inflection and emphasis.

They use this trick to distill their

parts into the yin and yang of comedy in its purest form. They interact with an audience that understands them perfectly, whether Smoot is tricking one patron into throwing a ball at Mump, or Mump is solemnly soliciting another to take a wildly posed picture.

By speaking their nonsense with conviction and, yes, clarity, they offer a peek into the wonderland of how much we convey by body language, and the way we say something rather than what we actually say.

"Ferno" shows Mump and Smoot doing their shtick as they wait for an airplane. When the pilot doesn't show, Mump decides to fly the plane himself. They crash and experience dismemberment, death and life after death while conveying a panoply of complicated emotions—wrenching, desperate and loving as well as funny.

Under Karen Hines' expert direction, the show works so seamlessly, you can't see her hand at all. The emphasis is on the performers as it should be—as alone in the world as Beckett's Didi and Gogo.

And they play their parts to

perfection. Kennard's towering Mump stares down Smoot and the audience with as much intimidation as ego itself, determined to control. Turner's ingenuous Smoot plays the mischievous id sneaking around Mump's directives with anarchic delight.

Campbell Manning's set design, chiefly a simple wooden crate of a plane on a black stage, reduces their world to basic elements. Michel Charbonneau's lighting, and a lot of smoke, takes the clowns up to the clouds and back. David Hines' music and sound effects underscore the mood of this funny yet thought-provoking show. Like "Children of Paradise," Mump & Smoot's "Ferno" makes you not only laugh, but also contemplate the marvelous complexities of existence. It shouldn't be missed.

■ "Mump & Smoot in 'Ferno,'" La Jolla Playhouse's Mandell Weiss Forum, UC San Diego, La Jolla Village Drive and Torrey Pines Road, La Jolla. Tuesday-Saturday, 8 p.m.; Sundays, 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. Ends Oct. 2. \$19-\$32. (619) 550-1010. Running time: 75 minutes.

Calgary Herald

November 14, 1993

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ENTERTAINMENT

CALGARY HERALD

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Clowns keep their audience in stitches

By MARTIN MORROW
Calgary Herald

In their latest show, Mump and Smoot die and go to Hell, where not even their god can save them. Or, to put it their way: Mump and Smoot go and go to Ferno, where not even Umno can save them.

For you should know that Mump and Smoot, the surreal Toronto clown team playing One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo this weekend, speak gibberish. Theirs is a strange but easy-to-grasp language, sounding at various times like German, Quebecois and Swahili, but just as often like the distorted dream English of James Joyce. To venture an esoteric comparison, their conversations sometimes remind one of the exchanges between Jute and Mutt, the comic duo of Finnegan's Wake.

However, there is nothing in the least bit esoteric about Mump and Smoot. Their antics are the familiar ones of much better-known comedy teams — happy echoes of Stan and Ollie, Bud and Lou, Ralph

Abbott and Costello had suddenly acquired the sadistic streak of Monty Python, as the pair serve up hilariously sick sight gags involving severed limbs, cannibalism and futile murder. "Futile" because, however much they try to stab and bludgeon each other in a fit of anger, they cannot die. They're already dead, and in Hell. From there the show moves onto a third level, touching on religious faith and reincarnation and looking, for a moment or two, like a contemporary variant on the medieval morality play.

If this sounds heavy, it isn't. On the contrary, it would be interesting if Mump and Smoot, alias Michael Kennard and John Turner, went a bit deeper in this last part. But why complain, when they continually keep us in stitches with their accomplished clowning? Naturally, Turner's Smoot, the child-like patsy, gets most of the sympathy and laughs. With his short pants and two stubby red horns, he may look like a juvenile devil, but only proves to be full of innocent high spirits.

Kennard's Mump (sporting one pointy blue horn) is the grouchy straight-man who

thinks he's smarter than he really is and bullies poor Smoot, not to mention members of the audience. (At Friday's performance, the audience was so caught up in the show that, when Mump or Smoot asked people questions, they answered back in gibberish.)

Director Karen Hines, with the help of several designers, gives their trip to Hades a playful staging that seems to have brought out the kid in everyone. Campbell Manning's set could be the backyard creation of an imaginative 10-year-old, involving as it does a makeshift plane that looks (appropriately enough) like an open coffin with wings, mounted on an inner tube for mobility, with a couple of fans serving as the propellers. Michael Charbonneau contributes some enjoyable spook-house lighting, including a blackout sequence with the fluttering ghosts of Mump and Smoot. And Jordan Samuel grosses us out with his amusingly gory prosthetics.

Obviously, while Mump and Smoot aren't for kids, teenagers will get a big kick out of them. And for adults, too, they offer one helluva good time.

MUMP AND SMOOT in FERNO, written and performed by Michael Kennard and John Turner, directed by Karen Hines. Presented by One Yellow Rabbit's High Performance Rodeo at the Uptown Stage, tonight at 8 p.m. Tickets: \$10.

and Ed. And the first half of Ferno has the predictable premise of some vintage vaudeville skit, two-reeler or sitcom episode.

Tall, belligerent Mump and little, mischievous Smoot are waiting to catch an airplane to take them on vacation to a tropical paradise called Pugsville. When the pilot doesn't turn up, wise-guy Mump discovers an instruction book and decides he can fly the plane himself. All goes well, until they hit an electrical storm, the engines conk out and they fall screaming to earth in a fiery crash.

That's when things burn black, comedy-wise, and the team begin to live up to their tag, "clowns of horror." It's as if

Dangerous laughs travel with Mump and Smoot

By Jeanne Cooper
SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE

If you've seen adult clowns Mump and Smoot before, you know you probably wouldn't want to go on vacation with them. As portrayed by Canadians Michael Kennard and John Turner, they are not too bright, they argue a lot, and bad things happen to them. But you can enjoy their nightmare travel scenario from a relatively safe distance in "Ferno," running in repertory at the American Repertory Theatre with their one-act play with a torture theme, "Caged."

The distance is only relatively safe, because Mump (Kennard) and Smoot (Turner) relish involving the audience in their sporadic improvisations. These range from bounding offstage to chide latecomers to their faces — all in the clowns' Ummonian dialect, which garbles swear words and other common phrases while using tone to convey context — to Smoot's cadging food supplies (later returned) and asking for a show of support during one of the pair's many spats. (Audience members who respond in Ummonian receive special praise.)

On stage, nothing is safe. Mump and Smoot enter with suitcases and plastic lei, play a few games and quickly descend into bickering. But that's nothing compared to how fast their plane descends after know-it-all Mump decides he can fly the craft himself rather than wait for the pilot to show up. There's a harrowing plummet through fog-machine clouds, followed by a grisly tableau: The plane is in pieces, and so are Mump and Smoot.

In the subsequent "Lord of the Flies" scene, certain detached body parts become weapons, then snacks; the gory grotesquerie had the audi-

In the 'Lord of the Flies' scene, certain detached body parts become weapons, then snacks; the gory grotesquerie had the audience laughing and groaning simultaneously.

MUMP & SMOOT'S FERNO

Play in one act by Michael Kennard and John Turner

Directed by Karen Hines. Set, Campbell Manning. Lights, Michel Charbonneau. Costumes, Sydney Sproule. Music, David Hines. Presented by American Repertory Theatre

At: Loeb Drama Center, in repertory with "Caged" through July 24

ence laughing and groaning simultaneously. The macabre images then evolve into curiously spiritual ones, as Mump has intimations of new immortality, and thus his recent mortality. A special-effects interlude involving glowing ghosts (their souls perhaps?) is not as affecting emotionally as the expressions that cross the clowns' faces, trying to reconcile their lives and apparent deaths. Their humor is perverse, touching and very human.

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Review: 'Ferno'

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April 11, 1994 | 12:00AM PT

Fear not – Mump and Smoot, Canada's clowns of horror from the planet Ummo, are no more horrifying than such forebears as Laurel and Hardy, Abbott and Costello, and Estragon and Vladimir, though in "Ferno" (get it?) they do venture further than before into Grand Guignol territory with bloody severed limbs and nibblings of cannibalism.

Variety Staff (<http://variety.com/author/variety-staff/>)

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There’s no doubt that “Ferno” is a more sophisticated and imaginative piece of clowning than “Caged,” the work with which Mump (Michael Kennard) and Smoot (John Turner) introduced themselves to New York in 1991 and which is running in repertory with “Ferno” at the Yale Repertory Theater.

Wearing the same clown costumes and makeup they sport in “Caged,” Kennard and Turner first appear to be, say, father and small son setting out on a vacation from an airport. But then, donning white flight overalls, they decide they can fly the waiting plane themselves.

The plane is an enchanting contraption of bits and pieces including propellers that are electric fans, but the results are disastrous. They crash. They lose an arm, a leg. Their loving relationship disintegrates, along with the plane. They lose faith in their god, also known as Ummo. They appear to have died. Or is it all simply a preflight nightmare? (The ending needs strengthening.)

Speaking Ummonian, the breezy gibberish they’ve perfected, and slipping in an English word here and there to point the way, Kennard and Turner use both physical and verbal clowning as the former, playing the “bright,” gangly Mump, bosses and nurtures the “dim,” pigeon-toed Smoot of Turner. They play expertly off one another and their audience, an audience that’s sometimes heckled and put-upon affectionately by the antic pair.

But the law of diminishing returns does set in, even though “Ferno” (like “Caged”) runs less than 80 minutes. A scene in which ghosts fly around in the dark would be all the better for being half as long.

Clearly these shenanigans are a somewhat specialized taste. Equally clearly, what Kennard and Turner do has built-in limitations. But what they do, they do very well — and with complete conviction. They obviously believe implicitly in their art and craft, an approach that’s all but completely disarming. David Hines’ rhythmically propulsive music and sound effects, presumably synthesized, play an integral role throughout.

Ferno

Yale Repertory Theater, New Haven; 489 seats; \$ 28 top

Production

A Yale Repertory Theater presentation of a clown show in one act created and performed by Michael Kennard and John Turner. Directed by Karen Hines.