

Your Show of Shows

Theater Too stages explosively funny *Big Bang*; Stage West goes Japanese with a sexy puppet play

By Elaine Liner

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K. Doug Miller (left) and Gary Floyd give dynamite performances in *The Big Bang*.

Details:

The Big Bang continues through September 7 at Theatre Too. Call 214-871-3300.

The Long Christmas Ride Home continues through September 14 at Stage West, Fort Worth. Call 817-784-9378.

Subject(s):

[The Big Bang](#), [The Long Christmas Ride Home](#), [history of the universe](#), [musical theater](#), [puppetry](#)

If it were produced the way its characters intended, *The Big Bang* would fill a big stage with 312 actors, 6,000 costumes, 302 "prosthetic devices" and a budget somewhere north of \$83 million. But in the riotously funny production back for a second go-round at tiny **Theatre Too**, what we get is the no-frills backers' audition version starring the show's pair of hyperactive composers (played by K. Doug Miller and Gary Floyd) and their pianist (Terry Dobson, who also directed) acting out the history of the universe up to 1969. Total budget: A fruit basket and replacement stuffing for a couple of sofa pillows.

Hoping to interest investors (played by us, the audience) in underwriting their ridiculous 12-hour epic musical, Jed Feuer and Boyd Graham (fictional characters named for the actual writers) romp through a shorthand 75-minute performance of *Big Bang* highlights in the living room of an absent Manhattan proctologist. The two guys play all the characters, from Adam and Eve to Adolf and Eva, using whatever they can grab—curtains, umbrellas, lampshades, cat beds—for props and costumes.

Between their razzle-dazzle numbers, they giddily describe the impossible special effects they envision. Just picture a hydraulic turntable stage flipping over to reveal the Red Sea. And then "a half-finished pyramid coming up through the floor." Imagine the march of time skipping from the Civil War to World War II to Woodstock, all re-enacted with snappy show tunes. It's Cecil B. DeMille meets John Waters at Caesars Palace. Just not as classy.

When they did this show 18 months ago at Theatre Too, the narrow crypt of an acting space under Theatre Three in The Quadrangle, Miller and Floyd were fall-down funny. Now that they don't have to struggle to remember the score's wacky, nonstop patter, they're even better—fall-down, get-up, slap-it and snap-it funny. They're now as quick with their quips as a veteran comedy team. Floyd's the tall, handsome one with the good pecs and crooner's tenor. Miller's the little clown with the evil twinkle and a wicked gift for mimicry. He does a killer Eva Braun as Marlene Dietrich in garlic-string pigtails, croaking "I'm just a girl who

can't say *nein*." Oy vey.

The Big Bang calls for complete abandonment of subtle moves by its stars. This is rock 'em, sock 'em vaudeville performed with wide-eyed and completely willful ignorance of how truly terrible (and offensive to some) the material they're selling is. Jed and Boyd rhyme "Snapple" with "Sistine Chapel," and "Exodus" with "vexed at us." When Adam and Eve romp around the Garden of Eden,

the boys strip to their jockstraps and sing a little ditty called "Free Food and Frontal Nudity." The mothers of Gandhi and Jesus join in a kvetching duet about their ungrateful sons. And Attila the Hun (sung by Miller) becomes a Sinatra-like lounge lizard in a colander helmet.

Some of the bits work better than others. When Minnehaha and Pocahontas get together for drinks at the Algonquin (get it?), they go a few puns too far. And it's crazy-silly that the best song in the show is a love ballad set during the Irish potato famine. Floyd, fondling a round little spud, sings "Gazin' in your eyes, somethin' in me dies" with just the right amount of au gratin sincerity.

Poking at the clichés of lots of Broadway's real big-name shows—*The Mikado*, *The King & I*, *Cabaret* and *Cats*—Feuer and Graham humbly send up their own grand ambitions. Dream big, they seem to say, but think small. As summer's comedies give way to autumn's dramas, *The Big Bang* gets in a last gasping laugh at theatrical hot air.

The puppet sex gets really steamy in *The Long Christmas Ride Home*, now onstage at Fort Worth's **Stage West**. Puppet sex, you say? To which we reply, *Wa wa wee wow wow*.

Paula Vogel's narrative-driven one-act goes for a highly stylized, puppet-using Kabuki-Noh-Benihana-esque telling of a ghost story about a screwed-up American family who has the fight to end all fights on a car trip back from grandma's house one snowy Christmas Eve. Dad (Bill Jenkins) is an "assimilated Jew" who secretly lusts for a neighbor named Sheila and has "slept with half the wives in church." Mom (Lana K. Hoover) is a lapsed Catholic who drags the three kids to Unitarian Universalist services. Son Stephen (Josh Blann) is the sensitive one who turns out to be gay. Little sister Claire (Ginger Goldman) will become a homicidal lesbian in her 20s and then marry a man and have some kids. Older sis Rebecca (Shannon Worthington) survives a suicide attempt.

Performed on a nearly bare set designed by Jim Covault (with gorgeous lighting by Michael O'Brien), the play unfolds in a series of flashbacks and flash-forwards tied to that fateful Christmas Eve journey. Vogel, who won a Pulitzer for *How I Learned to Drive* (she does like those car themes), juggles her timelines. In this play, we know it's the past when the kids are being played by Bunraku-inspired rod puppets (gorgeous things designed by Heather Jarry). Only when their characters grow up do the adult actors, who serve as the puppeteers of their youthful selves, step out from behind their dolls and begin to speak their own lines.

It's when they come of age that the characters engage in that risky, X-rated behavior with some lusty shadow puppets (projected on an upstage screen). It's certainly a first at Stage West to feature silhouetted cunnilingus. Later there is fairly graphic puppet-on-actor anal. Yep, that checks off another box in the critic's "seen it all" inventory.

Puppet fucking aside, *The Long Christmas Ride Home* does tell a haunting tale about violence, fate and everlasting love. Looking on from the afterlife, Stephen, in a white kimono, takes us back again and again to the car accident that almost claims his entire family. Here Vogel is at her most obvious, placing the car on the edge of a precipice to see how the squabbling family will tip in the face of disaster. The event has profound effects on the characters' future relationships. Each of the children, as a young adult, is seen pleading desperately with an unseen lover. From the street, they shout up to windows, where the shadow puppet exes taunt them with silent rejection.

The uncluttered, Easter-flavored Stage West production has been delicately directed by Jerry

Russell. Quiet, affecting performances have been coaxed from his cast, particularly Goldman and Blann, both making their first appearances at this theater. This is deceptively difficult material, given that it's basically a short story spoken aloud in longish monologues, but the actors succeed at keeping the minimalism from being static. In the role of the Unitarian minister who shows erotic Japanese woodcuts at the Christmas service, Ryan Manalansan brings soft humor to his "sermon" and a dancer's grace to his gestures.

Giving the various non-human actors their oomph are additional puppeteers Cassie Bann, Suzanne Fordering, Lark Johnston and Sachin Patel. Way to rock those rods, kids.