



Slouching Towards Disneyland: Comedy. By Merle (Ian Shoales) Kessler and Joshua Raoul Brody. Directed by Bill Allard. (Through Dec. 8. The Marsh, 1062 Valencia, San Francisco. 85 minutes. Tickets \$15-\$35. Call (800) 838-3006 or visit www.themarsh.org.)

by Robert Hurwitt

When Edison had the bright idea that became what we all know as a lightbulb, what went off over his head? Did language evolve as a form of sycophancy? Would it have spoiled the party if Jesus turned the water into grape juice? Why do we know so many ways to kill a vampire when vampires don't exist?

Ian Shoales, incorrigible social critic and intellectual gadfly, is back at the Marsh holding forth on everything that puzzles or just plain bugs him. That covers a lot of ground in "Slouching Towards Disneyland," the new show created by Shoales' real-life alter ego, writer and performer Merle Kessler, and his faithful composer, accompanist and all-round sidekick Joshua Raoul Brody. "Slouching," which opened Thursday, touches on everything from the creation of the universe (Big Bang or God?) to blogs, text-messaging, Fox News, "The Da Vinci Code" ("a John Grisham novel with heresies") and the war in Iraq.

That's the good news. Kessler's acerbic Shoales, a character from Duck's Breath Mystery Theatre and longtime commentator on various NPR shows (currently a regular feature of "Philosophy Talk"), can always be counted on for a welcome dose of provocatively brain-tickling social satire. He didn't seem comfortable with or in control of his material at Thursday's show, but given Kessler's track record, Shoales should be back in his usual fast-talking, penetrating form once he masters his lines and he and director (and Duck's Breath colleague) Bill Allard fine-tune the comic timing.

In form, "Slouching" is a classic Shoales outing. Kessler prowls the stage in a gray suit and tie that match his hair, delivering his lines with his trademark worried scowl – or picking up a guitar or banjo for a sardonic song. Brody, in droopy mustache and Litquake T-shirt, partakes in the occasional quick trade-off of quips and accompanies the songs on piano, accordion and backup vocals.

The structure can be a little hard to follow, but that's partly the point. "Slouching" doesn't so much explore the history of human thought and culture as riff on various aspects of those topics, caroming from one millennium to another with the speed of wayward allusions. New Testament stories get mixed up with Plato's

prowess as a wrestler and thoughts on the rise and fall of Hollywood before bouncing back to Rome.

Some of Shoales' mini-rants are already richly comic and acute – a surreal tale of various prototypes for the robotic Abraham Lincoln at the 1964 World's Fair; a hilariously off-color rumination on images of the Virgin Mary cropping up in unlikely places. The well-written songs are peppy and sharply satiric, ranging from a caveman's remarkably astute musings on the future of humanity and a mock-philosophic "Song of the 16th Century" to a convoluted take on re-enactments of re-enactments of famous events.

Other bits are less well developed and jokes insufficiently set up, such as Shoales' takes on Greek and 16th century philosophy, the Thirty Years' War, rum and piracy, blackface minstrelsy and the creation of Disneyland. Punch lines weren't landing Thursday, either because Kessler had left out some material or because his momentum was off. Even the songs seemed under-rehearsed, with Kessler and Brody's vocals and instrumentals often failing to mesh.

From the evidence of its best moments, there's a very good Shoales outing lurking in this material. As of Thursday, though, the rude, rewarding potential of "Slouching" was still, well ... slouching toward the Marsh, waiting to be born.

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THE GAY/LESBIAN/BITRANS NEWSPAPER & EVENTS CALENDAR FOR THE BAY AREA

Slouching Towards Disneyland

By Albert Goodwyn

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Merle Kessler and Joshua Brody make an historic trek to Disneyland

Slouching toward Disneyland is the most cynical, and intricately knowledgeable, history of so-called civilization I have ever seen. Merle Kessler as Ian Shoales and Joshua Brody as Raoul present a monologue-intensive dissertation with songs and music, about how mankind went from Plato's beings chained in a cave to people riding on a train in an imaginary kingdom. The humor of the show is deeply embedded with thought-provoking associations and pithy commentaries. It is a comedy, but Kessler never cracks a smile.

His deadpan delivery is studied and consistent. Once he almost allowed himself to enjoy his own sardonic delivery, but his persona as a cynic won out through the play. There is a time line in his monologue, occasionally prompted by Raoul, but it is not easily discernible. Kessler is like a histrionic professor who knows exactly where he is going, but his students will not see the path until the end of the semester. With his repeated references to Prester John, a legendary ancient king and priest, and more topical references, such as to Fox News and sheikhs, he implicitly states his positions. Raoul plays along on piano and accordion, but occasionally cues up a soundtrack referring to Karl Marx's phrase about "the dustbin of history. Some of their songs include lines like, "I found myself in Anaheim," and "I take three hits of acid."

Kessler poses difficult questions, which he does not answer. Like, what was better before sliced bread? When Edison had a bright idea, it could not have been a light bulb that appeared over his head. What was it? A candle? A torch? They ask, since we have miniature golf, where is gigantic golf? His epic timeline is desultory and leaps from myth to cinematic references. He notes that we know many factoids about how to kill vampires, even though they do not exist. He imagines how primitive man must have been disgusted at having to eat mammoth every night. Sometimes Raoul asked questions to advance the monologue, but he is mainly the musician, although Kessler played banjo and guitar. They are both baritenors.

Kessler's facial expressions were consistently gloomy and mean as he mixed historical fact with his personal observations. His line-load is immense, and it's

no wonder that he occasionally stuttered during delivery. But the performance is gripping because of its quick pace and the unexpected zingers.

“Let’s go see some lions munch on Christians,” was a sure laugh-getter, and the way he side-stepped some issues was funny in itself. He finally got a little more physically expressive toward the end when he personified sites in the blogosphere with his wiggling fingers. He does end with a salute to what he calls “the intuitive genius of Walt Disney.” He never makes reference to the W. B. Yeats line from which he took his title; “some rough beast slouches toward a new Jerusalem,” but it is apparent Kessler means to imply that all the world is a theme park.

Slouching towards Disneyland continues through Dec. 8 at The Marsh, 1062 Valencia Street, San Francisco. Tickets (\$15 to \$35) are available by phone at (800) 838-3006 or on line at www.themarsh.org.