

EVERYBODY'S GOT ONE

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Odyssey Theatre

After two years spent basically at home watching HGTV robbed of the lifelong habit of worshipping live performance from both sides of the footlights, it still seems rather strange and vaguely claustrophobic to find myself stuffed like a sardine in a darkened theatre trying to breathe as normally as possible behind my triple-filtered mask.

As much as I herald the return to normal—if being obsessed with all things theatrical could ever be normal—most all of the anticipated comfort that descends upon me these days in this not-so brave new world when lights dim and the show begins, was seriously challenged seeing the always demonically-driven mother of all speedfreaks, my friend John Fleck, hobbling unsteadily onto the Odyssey stage leaning on a wooden crutch.

The legendary Fleck is revered as one of the NEA Four, a courageous quartet of outrageously non-pc counterculture performance artists who in 1990 took the federal National Endowment of the Arts all the way to the Supreme Court when their grants were canceled on the grounds of obscenity. Best of all, they won.

Over the years before and after that notoriety, aside from many film roles, as well as frequent stage appearances (including our award-winning production of Tennessee Williams' *Small Craft Warnings* at the Evidence Room that pitted me against him for an LA Weekly Award for Best Supporting Actor in 2003), Fleck has created a steady stream of delightfully bizarre one-person shows that have toured nationally and internationally, most directed over a 35-year-plus period by another counterculture legend, director David Schweitzer. Now, again under the watchful eye of Schweitzer, Fleck returns to the Odyssey where his highly successful *Blacktop Highway* world premiered in 2018, another solo effort where he created a gothic horror screenplay and played every character.

His newest effort, *it's alive, IT'S ALIVE!*, has been germinating through the entire pandemic lockdown period and, as all of Fleck's creations, it could not possibly more topical or, to quote a character in one of his previous performance pieces, "It's nuttier than a porta-potty at a peanut butter festival."

Knowing this guy's quirky and inimitable talents, I should have known the omnipresent crutch and his exaggeratedly diminished physicality was part of the show, included to invoke the aftermath of two years spent in forced lockdown and working on it from his "zoomrage"—that's Zoom meetings held in his garage for anyone not inside the head of John Fleck.

Originally planned for the summer of 2020 to be performed in the Odyssey's parking lot to show just how resilient our indomitable and deluded El Lay theatrical community can be, it was sadly a plan that the city of Santa Monica could not see happening. Instead, *it's alive, IT'S ALIVE!* continued to evolve and develop over our time in isolation suffering from "social agoraphobia" to become an even more outrageous entertainment, complete with music and dancers and moments including Fleck himself singing "It's Only Just Begun" in a breathy and tortured falsetto, his continuously constipated-looking rubbery face protruding from a plastic bubble covered in glittery plush roses meant to transform him into a talking COVID cell.

On the Odyssey's nearly bare stage ("So yeah, it's not the Center Theatre Group, okay?") and accompanied by Scott Roberts on keyboards and musical director John Snow on upright base, the manic Mr. F turns our current dystopian daily lives into a hilariously skewed cabaret event as he tries desperately to find the fun in our fears for the future—of course compounded this past weekend by the latest horrors on the other side of the world perpetrated by a *true* madman.

"Rather than letting whatever variant is rampaging at the moment get the better of us," David Schweitzer explains, "we hope audiences will want to join us in making relentless fun of it no matter what new contagious aspects emerge or new terrors await." Luckily for us, he and Fleck are relentless in their signature efforts to unearth the lighter side of our current barrage of global horrors, here wildly aided by singer-dancers Tomoko Karina and Kyle G. Fuller who, along with Roberts and Snow, do their best to keep up without seeming totally unsure moment to moment what exactly is going on in Fleckland.

The 55-minute assault to our sense could not be more welcome at this point in time. From all-singing, all-dancing COVID cells to Fleck's occasional turn as a Brunhilde-helmeted Trumpian-spouting version of the infamous Q-Anon Shaman ("My God! He realizes, "I'm channeling my sister in Cleveland!"), as usual nothing is off the table.

This includes John Fleck ending *it's alive, IT'S ALIVE!* by delivering a dead-serious rendition of the Disney classic, "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes," giving new meaning to the lyrics, "No matter how you're grieving / If you keep on believing / The dream that you wish will come true." Still, leaving the Odyssey complex as the laughter died down and we were instantly faced with the real world again, I could only hope beyond much hope that such a wish might indeed come true.

**THROUGH MAR. 20: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 N. Sepulveda Blvd., West LA.
310.477.2055 or OdysseyTheatre.com**
