

# THE GEEK Shall Inherit

KAT: I wrote the score

For this video game.

It's a game that hurtles geeky boys through space,  
Pasty and pimply and hunched-over teenagers  
Paying my rent and my huge student loans

'Cause that's what a Master's in music will get you  
A backbreaking bloodsucking black hole of debt

And you try and you try not to be just a sellout  
You try and you try to be true to your art

And instead I accompany blow-ups and bleeps  
And the blast of an alien jet  
Reality sucks.  
It sucks.

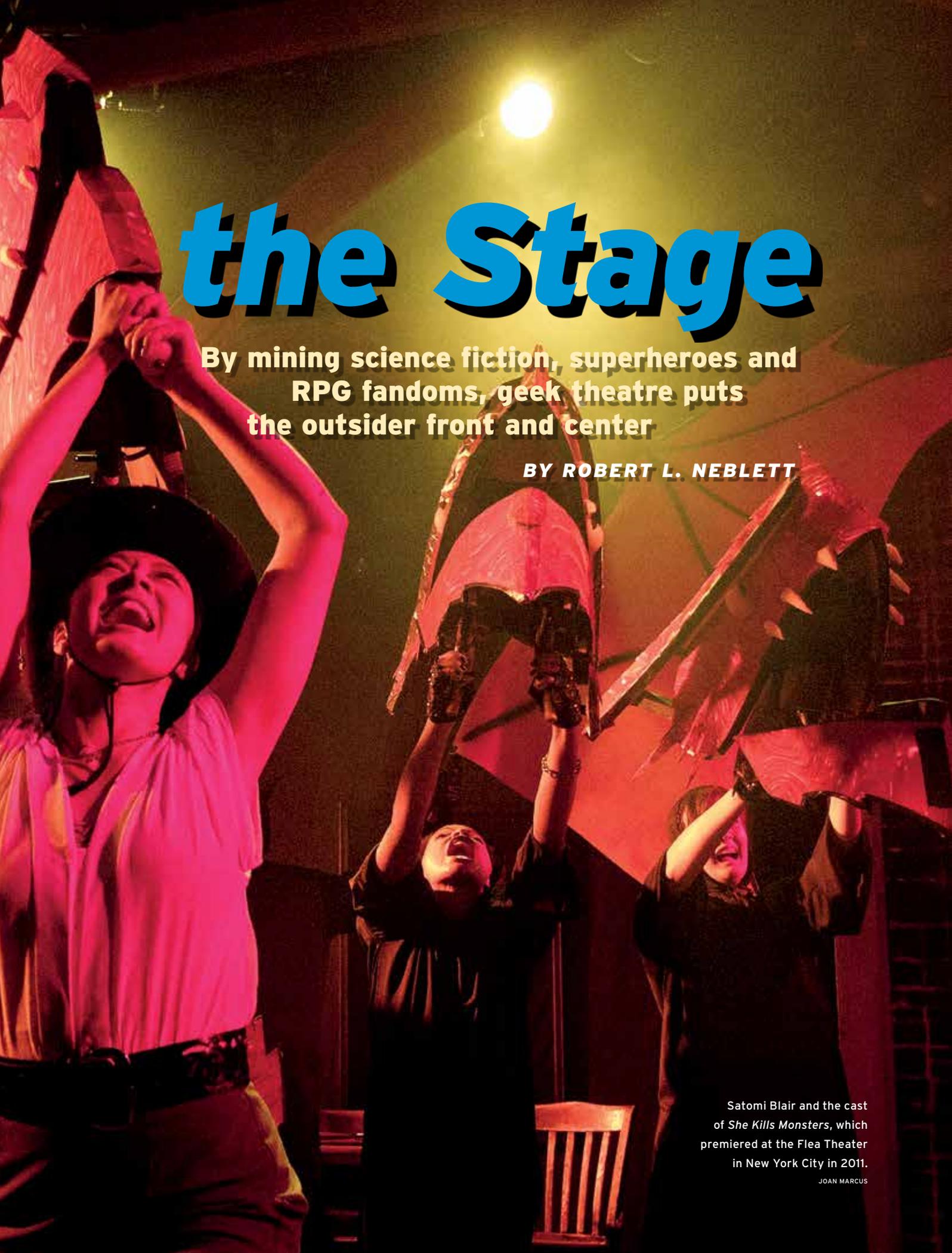
## SO LAMENTS COMPOSER KAT, THE PROTAGONIST OF THE NEW MUSICAL

*Ernest Shackleton Loves Me* by Joe DiPietro, Brendan Milburn and Valerie Vigoda, premiering in April under the auspices of Seattle's Balagan Theatre. This lyric, from the show's opening number, evinces a familiar cultural stereotype of the geeky teenage gamer—someone who is divorced from the real world and submerged in the virtual cyberscape of high-tech media. Kat eventually learns to embrace the “300 beta-test boys” who vote her music their favorite component of the game “Star Blazers,” ironically unaware that in her current state of existence—vlogging from her freezing apartment that “reality sucks” while hunched over a Frankenstein-like makeshift music studio cobbled together from the corpses of keyboards, reel-to-reel players and electronic samplers—she is just as isolated as her nerdy fans.

*Ernest Shackleton's* theatrical connection with geek culture does not end there. A trans-dimensional cyber-romance between Kat and the legendary Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton forms the foundation of the plot's action and emotional journey, in a mix of science fiction and fantasy. But deep at the show's heart are Kat's desperate cries for a community that accepts her for who she is and celebrates her quirks and individuality. To fill this inner need, she even creates a virtual choir by infinitely sampling her voice on top of itself. Multiple layers of singing Kats reverberate through her apartment and the interstellar techno-void of “Star Blazers,” a metaphor of self-imposed emotional independence that's been felt by many a lonely fanboy/girl or gamer over the years.

Kat might be surprised to find that her beta-test boys are filling the stages and audiences of theatres across America, in a new trend casually called “geek theatre.” And in doing so, they are transforming popular opinion of what the geek label signifies.

In 2013, a year of entertainment culture that has witnessed the 50th anniversary of “Doctor Who”; the release, and subsequent box-office domination, of the newest big-screen entries in the *Star Trek*, *The Hobbit* and various Marvel franchises; and the unavoidable draw of the television adaptations of fantasy novels (“Game of Thrones”) and comic books (“The Walking Dead,” “Arrow”), it is only fitting that American theatre is experiencing its own “Revenge of the Nerds.”



# *the Stage*

By mining science fiction, superheroes and RPG fandoms, geek theatre puts the outsider front and center

BY ROBERT L. NEBLETT

Satomi Blair and the cast of *She Kills Monsters*, which premiered at the Flea Theater in New York City in 2011.

JOAN MARCUS

***“I’m seeing are theatre people exploding with joy when two of their beloved subcultures come together in a delicious mash-up.”***

***—Melissa Hillman***



COURTESY OF MAGIC SMOKING MONKEY THEATRE



ADAM WOLF

Clockwise from top right: *The One-Hour Star Wars Trilogy* at Magic Smoking Monkey Theatre. Valerie Vigoda and Will Swenson in a 2013 workshop of *Ernest Shackleton Loves Me* in New York City. Jason Sharp, left, and Jayson Potter, get married with the Right Honorable Ruth Monster Ginsburg (operated by Rachel Jackson) officiating.

*Astro Boy and the God of Comics. Of Dice and Men. She Kills Monsters. Two Point Ob! A Klingon Christmas Carol. MacHomer. A Very Potter Musical. Mr. Burns, a Post-Electric Play. The Intergalactic Nemesis.*

This is just a small sampling of the plays dotting the marquees of stages throughout the nation, each one representing a different aspect of geek culture, from RPGs (role-playing games), to science fiction, to Japanese manga/anime, to comic book superheroes—a selection of categories that barely scratches the surface of the wide diversity of the geek community.

Even the recently shuttered *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* on Broadway (soon to reappear in Las Vegas) denotes the power of this niche market to attract a young demographic to the performing arts scene.

No longer do the 1980s stereotypes of Steve Urkel or Anthony Michael Hall’s character from *Sixteen Candles* (credited by John Hughes only as “The Geek”) dominate the cultural consciousness as the sole representatives of what playwright Cameron McNary terms “geek minstrelsy.” McNary’s Dungeons & Dragons-themed play *Of Dice and Men* will be playing at Chicago’s Otherworld Theatre

Company March 6–30. Australian playwright Keith Gow, whose “Doctor Who”-themed play *Who Are You Supposed to Be?* was a hit at the 2013 Edinburgh Fringe Festival, states, “The nerds of ’80s films have disappeared because those nerds turned into Bill Gates and Steve Jobs—and Joss Whedon.”

What were once terms of contempt or ridicule have been reclaimed as self-referential monikers of empowerment, although heated debates do continually rage about the vital distinctions between the terms “geek” and “nerd.” Playwright Lloyd Suh agrees with Gow. “So many people who identified themselves using those markers are now running the cultural conversation, or at least have become major contributors to it,” explains Suh.

**THIS ROUTINE MAINSTREAMING OF GEEK CULTURE** can be fraught with pitfalls for the unwise theatre producer who attempts to manipulate its audience base for the sake of pursuing a profit or an untapped demographic. Qui Nguyen, co-artistic director of New York City’s Vampire Cowboys Theatre Company, arguably the best-known geek theatre company in America, contends, “Geeks

Alton Alburo and Sasha Diamond in *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!* at Children's Theatre Company, in a co-production with Ma-Yi Theatre Company, playing this month.



DAN NORMAN

are savvy, smart and very selective when it comes to where they spend their dime. Just because there's a cape onstage doesn't mean it will suddenly unleash the geeksters upon your theatre."

Nguyen's plays, such as *She Kills Monsters* and *Alice in Slasherland*, routinely sell out to a young, hip crowd that eludes the marketing departments of most traditional performing arts organizations. *She Kills Monsters*, which has been produced across the country, is a touching drama in which a woman enters the unfamiliar realm of the online RPG Dungeons & Dragons after her younger sister's untimely death. She takes up the dead girl's unfinished quest as a last-ditch effort to achieve some kind of posthumous family connection.

"Our mission wasn't just making geek theatre, it was about making quality theatrical shows that created superheroes for people who don't often get to see themselves drawn that way," Nguyen says. "We also became the first, and currently only, theatre organization that's ever been sponsored by New York Comic Con—or any con for that matter—because we took our theatre craft as seriously as we took our geekdom."

Melissa Hillman, artistic director of the Bay Area's Impact Theatre, also wears her geekiness like a badge of honor. On any given day, one may find Hillman blogging about colorblind casting and then "squeeing" excitedly on Facebook about a Chewbacca hoodie. She and her husband are proud members of the 501st Legion, a worldwide *Star Wars*-themed cosplay (meaning: dressing up, and sometimes acting like, fictional characters) and charity organization.

Impact's programming has welcomed a geek aesthetic for years, proudly producing works by McNary and Robert Aguirre-Sacasa, and Hillman shares Nguyen's perspective. "I think the theatre community is already full of nerds," she says. "Sure, we pull in some of the gaming community who might not otherwise go to the theatre, but they don't make up the bulk of the audience. What I'm seeing are theatre people exploding with joy when two of their beloved subcultures come

together in a delicious mash-up." She then clarifies. "But, yes, we do see some gamers. When we did *Of Dice and Men*, the staff of a local game store came en masse one night because we did a flyer drop there."

The joy she references is often regarded as a defining element of geekdom, as attested by Simon Pegg, British actor and nerd icon, in an interview on BBC Radio's "Front Row": "It means you're into your stuff. You're proud of what you love.... Wear a cape in the street and not be worried what people say. It's just about being enthusiastic and out about it.... It's a liberation."

**IN 2011, WHEN JULIE TAYMOR INFAMOUSLY LEFT THE** creative team of *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark*, her exit became the subject of rampant speculation about the production's weaknesses and potential future. Tellingly, the first dramaturgical excision to accompany Taymor's departure was the critically derided "Geek Chorus" of comic-book aficionados. Their function was to alter Spidey's classic comic book origin story to include elements of Greek mythology.

Scotto Moore, a playwright whose alien-infected works are regularly produced at Seattle's Annex Theatre, says that Taymor's flaw was she saw the story from an outsider's perspective. "Look at the difference between Peter Jackson's absolute love and respect for J.R.R. Tolkien, which led to these magnificent movies about Middle-earth, versus the arrogance of Julie Taymor trying to tackle a portrayal of Spider-Man with zero understanding of the character's impact on pop culture—and zero interest in finding out."

Taymor's exit from *Spider-Man* made room for the entrance of playwright Aguirre-Sacasa to restructure the musical's book (along with Glen Berger). A 2003 Yale School of Drama graduate, Aguirre-Sacasa brought with him the added expertise of being a published writer for Marvel Comics. A self-proclaimed comic-book geek, he has also been involved with stage adaptations of the *Archie* comics and a revised version of the 1966 Charles Strouse/Lee Adams musical *It's a Bird... It's*

a *Plane... It's Superman* that played at Dallas Theater Center in 2010. Despite his love and respect for the form, both projects ran into legal pushback from the proprietaries. This is a risk for any play that uses characters from, and makes direct reference to, existing fictional entities.

In 2003, Aguirre-Sacasa's *Weird Comic Book Fantasy* premiered at Dad's Garage Theatre in Atlanta, Ga., under its original title, *Archie's Weird Fantasy*. A cease-and-desist order from Archie Comics resulted in an overhaul of the script to scrub any direct recognizable reference to the pop culture denizens of Riverdale. In that instance, objections from the rights holders addressed both the unlicensed use of trademarked material and the playwright's significant queering of the subject matter. *Archie's Weird Fantasy* reimagined beloved symbols of classic Americana as characters engaged in a coming-of-age and coming-out narrative. Despite the controversy surrounding his play, one of Aguirre-Sacasa's most recent nontheatrical projects is an official staff writing gig on Archie Comic's zombified new series *Afterlife with Archie*.

There's an entire subgenre of drama that frequently anchors fringe festivals around the world, a collection of loving stage parodies and abbreviated comic tributes to the classic (and often obscure) canon of science fiction and fantasy that has formed a common cultural vocabulary for generations of geeks and nerds. For example, since 2001, Canadian actor Charles Ross has charmed audiences with performances of his *One Man Star Wars Trilogy* and *One Man Lord of the Rings*. And each spring since 1996, St. Louis Shakespeare trades its doublets and farthingales for aluminum-foil spacesuits and vintage kitsch miniskirts for its late-night parody spin-off company, Magic Smoking Monkey Theatre.

Inspired by the Chicago storefront theatre scene of the early '90s, artistic director Donna Northcott began MSMT with a one-off stage production of Ed Wood's transvestite exploitation film, *Glen or Glenda*. "I wanted to do this show as if a bunch of nerdy kids were performing it in their parents' garage with \$100," she explains.

Armed with low expectations and even lower production values, *Glen or Glenda* became the first in an annual series of stage parodies based on a variety of sources from the realm of cult TV and film such as *Reefer Madness* and *Speed Racer*. Over the years, the company's

audiences have grown in numbers and transformed Magic Smoking Monkey Theatre into its own distinct entity, separate and apart from its Shakespearean origins. The company has also produced the entire cinematic oeuvre of "Worst Director of All Time" Ed Wood, including multiple renditions of *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, complete with pie-pan spaceships with lit sparkler rockets propelled above the heads of the audience on fishing line, a far cry from the multi-million-dollar theme park acrobatics of Broadway's *Spider-Man*.

Performed with tongues planted firmly in cheek, Magic Smoking Monkey shows are "not mockery," contends Northcott. "People often ask if we cast the worst actors who show up at auditions, and the opposite is true. It takes performers of great comic talent to perfect this style of comedy that walks the line between homage and caricature."

**KAT:** I make little boys feel like Supermen  
The finest and bravest conquering-the-future men  
Like Columbus, like Captain Underpants  
With courage to carry on in any circumstance

### IN ERNEST SHACKLETON LOVES ME, THE TITLE CHARACTER

transgresses time and space to be with Kat because he regards her as a muse, inspiring him to surmount insurmountable odds with her electronic compositions. Likewise, Kat receives a burst of inspiration when she sees how her music transforms adolescent gamers into the heroes of their wildest imaginations. The idea of the hero, particularly the superhero, plays a vital role in geek culture. This immersion into fantasy is a way of forgetting the mundane quality of the everyday world. Suh explains why this way of thinking appeals directly to young outsiders: "Imagining a different sort of future is automatically interesting to a kid who is looking to define themselves with a different vocabulary than the one they're surrounded by—especially if that future involves a narrative of empowerment."

Replete with fantastic creatures such as singing dragons and Woofenwolves, robot puppet plays, levitating rocks, flaming asteroid storms, transcendental Sherpas and song-and-dance numbers,

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## GEEK THEATRE: WHY THE OBSESSION?

A few artists weigh in

**QUI NGUYEN**, playwright, co-artistic director, *Vampire Cowboys*, New York City

Since audience expectations in theatre often don't rely on million-dollar special effects, theatre is allowed to explore superheroes and science-fiction characters inward, not just outward. Instead of just watching Superman save the world, we can really examine what it's like being an invulnerable man who is forced to live a day-time life of invisibility, we get to see the weaknesses he has beyond just Kryptonite.

**CAMERON MCNARY**, playwright, Columbia, Md.

My play *Of Dice and Men* isn't geek-art-for-geeks, although that can be great, it's geek-art-for-theatre-goers. Gamer geeks love the play and there are plenty of in-jokes for them to enjoy, but the biggest reason they give for loving it is that someone is finally telling their story accurately in a way "normals" can get. It speaks to the universal through the specific, and in the same way you don't have to be a 19th-century Russian Jew to get something out of *Fiddler on the Roof*, you don't have to be a gamer geek to get *Of Dice and Men*.

**CHARLES BATTERSBY**, editor, theaterfornerds.com

These genres deal with worlds that are often more perfect (or at least more interesting) than our own. Good usually triumphs over evil, and people who don't like their lot in life can change their situation through magic, mutations and super-science. It can also be inspiring and cause people to take action or change themselves for the better. For this generation, nerd culture isn't child's play, it's just another form of storytelling.

**TIFFANY KEANE**, artistic director, Otherworld Theatre Company, Chicago

I maintain that science fiction and fantasy, as a genre, doesn't create escapists. It creates explorers. Those stories teach everyone to be explorers. Push your limits, go outside your comfort zone and enjoy the new. Even if it seems alien at first, but you will surprise yourself with how much you will enjoy yourself.

Suh's play *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!* evokes a larger-than-life aesthetic that he labels "maximalism." This invented style replicates the bombast of space operas like *Star Wars* while also serving a very intimate emotional purpose that cuts to a key theme of childhood, especially for young people whose interests and personalities lie outside the mainstream. *The Wong Kids* played at Minneapolis's Children's Theatre Company in October as a co-production with New York-based Ma-Yi Theater Company. It's currently playing at La MaMa in New York City through Feb. 16.

"I didn't want to pick between making it a sci-fi story, a fantasy story, a superhero story, etc.," reflects Suh. "Instead I wanted to draw from all of them (and other genres too), because part of what I remember feeling when I was young was this sense of being overwhelmed by the massive, vast nature of the world. And so the pace, structure, quantity of influences, variations in tone and theme, and even the building emotional terrain of the play are designed to feel overwhelming in a similar way. It's unfamiliar and scary."

During their adventures through time and space, Bruce and Violet Wong battle terrifying monsters and aliens, but the most destructive danger they face is Violet's crushing desire to conform to social mores in order to find acceptance among her peers. Her fears of standing out from the crowd repeatedly force her to deny her individuality, undercutting her self-confidence.

A chilling moment of self-discovery occurs when Violet abandons her brother Bruce in the face of imminent danger and transports herself into an alternate dimension to escape. There she confronts an eerie mirror image of herself named Nobody. Only by conquering her personal demons, and looking past the distorted funhouse image of herself that she has created, can Violet rescue her brother and save the universe from evil.

Suh contrasts this scene with the sensory overload represented by the production's aforementioned "maximalism." "What happens when you take away all of that noise?" he wonders. "You're left with having to decipher what's really at the core of yourself—what you want, who you want to be, where you belong. And also, what you love."

In 2010, Annex Theatre found itself with a surprise hit on its hands when it produced Alexander Harris's *Alecto: Issue #1*, a satiri-

**Geek theatre, and geekdom itself, is a metaphor, an expression of hidden desires and personality traits.**

cal, Spandex-clad comedy about the hidden, questionable motives of a group of superheroes. In 2012, it revived these characters with *Team of Heroes: Behind Closed Doors*, the second installment of what would ultimately become known as the "Team of Heroes Trilogy" when it reached its final chapter in 2013's *Team of Heroes: No More Heroes*. Annex artistic director Pamala Mijatov describes the central characters of the trilogy as "a corporate-owned conglomeration of genetically enhanced reality stars," claiming that the ultimate audience appeal lay in the shows' "larger-than-life but recognizably human power struggles, love affairs, aspirations and betrayals."

Rachel Jackson, who portrayed the villain Chaos Theory in the last two "Team of Heroes" productions, acknowledges that the superhero narrative appeals to a sense of wish fulfillment. "It's about being more than you seem to be, which is appealing when you're feeling undervalued." She also adds, slyly, "Your comfort thought if you were supervillain-inclined would be, 'Just you wait!'"

What *Wong Kids* and *Team of Heroes* show is that geek theatre, and geekdom itself, is a metaphor, an expression of hidden desires and sublimated personality traits. But the genre also has a darker undertone, with certain plays exploring the question of what happens when the imagination becomes the only escape from isolation and external trauma, and the distinction between reality and virtual worlds becomes blurred. These issues become further complicated when looked at through the immersive virtual worlds of online gaming.

Jennifer Haley's *The Nether* (produced at Los Angeles's Center Theatre Group in 2013) and *Neighborhood 3: Requisition of Doom* explore the moral quagmire of whether actions committed in the virtual world of cyberspace, no matter how heinous, can carry any weight of

personal responsibility. *Neighborhood 3*—which was featured in the 2008 Humana Festival of New Plays in Louisville, Ky.—structures its plot as a series of "walkthroughs" in a video game environment. Its characters lose touch with the ability to distinguish between the gory zombie-killing action of the game and the potential deaths of parents in the real world.

In Deborah Zoe Laufer's *Leveling Up*—which premiered at Ohio's Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park in 2013 and is playing at Chicago's Steppenwolf Theatre Company Feb. 26–March 15—a skilled young video gamer retreats from the outside world, only to be recruited by the U.S. government to pilot remote combat drones. When he loses the ability to distinguish between the life-or-death impact of his new vocation and the virtual war games he loves, his grip on the real world begins to crumble away.

As precarious as the rules of this brave new reality may seem, Laufer takes a gentler view than Haley of obsessive behavioral traits like fantasy and game fixation. "It's acknowledging that the line between our world and the virtual world are blurring," she says of *Leveling Up*, "and it's easy to be confused about who is a 'real' friend and what is a 'real' battle. Figuring out what's real is tough. It was always tough; there's a new layer now."

Yet at its core—among the struggles between reality and fantasy, individuality verses conformity—geek theatre is about the search for community, and a search for self. Jackson sums up the genre's ethos towards self-acceptance and self-celebration, friendship and connection: "For geek theatre to work it really has to be genuine. When the ninja zombie monkeys are coming from a lovingly obsessed place, that makes a connection that speaks to other geeks."

This mash-up of the geek and the theatre artist can seep into real life in surprising and memorable ways. When a Seattle actor from Annex's "Team of Heroes" proposed to his partner, the only logical choice to join them in nerdy matrimony this past November was a puppet, the Right Honorable Ruth Monster Ginsburg. "If you're just doing a 'geek thing' to capture the geek audience," concludes Jackson (the human behind puppet Ginsburg), "that reads as too derivative and hollow, lacking heart. Geek theatre is all about heart." ❧

**Robert L. Neblett is a director, dramaturg and arts educator.**