

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Monster mash

Ecce Homo's latest explores the rise of Lady Gaga

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Nick Green



N Maxwell Lander

"It's a balanced exploration of fame, of celebrity and of realness," Alistair Newton explains. "And it's fabulous."

The hint of irony in the latter sentence does well to sum up a conversation with writer/director/producer Newton. He's discussing *Of a Monstrous Child*, the newest show created by his company, Ecce Homo. If you know Newton's work, you know to expect a hyper-stylized production, rife with smirks and satire, based on verbatim explorations of texts that deliver a delicious blend of theory, politics and pop culture.

This time, he's turned his gaze on Lady Gaga.

"I was making a lot of fun of her at that time," Newton says of the early days of Gaga, when her pop lyrics were being lauded as high art. But then a piece of an essay that she wrote at the age of 17 - about Spencer Tunick, exploring themes of nudity, freakishness and monstrosity - caught his attention. It made Newton look at Gaga in a different way. Drawing a title from her essay, "Of a Monstrous Child," Newton had the concept, the playwriting chops and the drive. All that was missing was Tyson James, also known as Cassandra Moore.

Many know actor/performer/queer-about-town James as a person who lives art. As an actor, James's stirring presence and gorgeous hair were recently on display this past season at Buddies, serving up call-girl realness in Daniel MacIvor's *Arigato, Tokyo*. As a drag performer, Moore has become renowned for her sexy style, energetic dancing and impeccable lip-synching. And in everyday life, Tyson and Cassandra are known as Lady Gaga superfans.

After hearing of James's devotion, Newton contacted him for an interview. James says Newton was interested in the parallels between Gaga the woman and Gaga the performer vis-à-vis James and Cassandra Moore. It's an intriguing similarity: both artists are people who have created characters that are realized extensions of themselves. Newton conducted several of these interviews, and the play began to form.

Many drafts later, *Of a Monstrous Child* is the story of a superfan who loses track of his friends and discovers Leigh Bowery. The performance artist and pop-culture icon takes James, in the role of Little Monster, through a veritable history lesson of all the queer icons that have constructed Lady Gaga. Along the way, the ensemble embodies stars such as Boy George, Grace Jones, Club Kid/convict Michael Alig and writer/Gaga critic Camille Paglia. This through-the-rabbit-hole journey leads the Little Monster to the Monster Ball. To quote Newton, "It's a disco Alice in Wonderland."

Through this journey, the show uses Lady Gaga to question the notion of pop-star identity. A difficult question, to be sure, and one that Newton has posed through his usual "verbatim" approach to playwriting, in which he uses actual quotes and text from the aforementioned celebrities (with the exception of Bowery) and his interviews with James.

Documentary text is often more compelling, Newton says, "because it's real. Truth is stranger than fiction."

Knowing *Ecce Homo*, strangeness is guaranteed, but in the good way. When you sit down to *Of a Monstrous Child*, you will be asked to think in a deeper way about an icon that can be dismissed as a passing trend with a flair for the dramatic. You will be dazzled by Newton's ability to bring theoretical conversations alive through theatre, dance and music. And you will be serenaded by the talented Kim Persona in the role of Gaga herself.

Gaga may be out of the spotlight for now, but this team of artists assert that her significance is far from over. "The gays are over her, for sure, and they've definitely turned against her," James says, excited to represent the greatness of all things Gaga. "She's still got it, baby."

Whether over her or under her spell, it's certain to be a great night out, one best paired with some post-show drinks and conversation. Trust: this Gaga night will give you lots to talk about.

Of a Monstrous Child

Tues, May 14-Sun, May 26

Buddies in Bad Times Theatre

12 Alexander St

buddiesinbadtimes.com

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