

Theatre

Still cracking us up after all these years

Mump and Smoot bring down the house

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Mump & Smoot: Cracked

Created by John Turner and Michael Kennard

Directed by Karen Hines

Starring John Turner and Michael Kennard

At The Cultch

in Vancouver on Wednesday

Imagine a space-age Laurel and Hardy with a splash of Beckett's Vladimir and Estragon and a twist (the macabre variety) of Penn and Teller, and you might conjure something close to the attitude of Mump and Smoot. Of course, you'd need to add in clown suits, face paint and Ummonian – the gibberish that passes for language on planet Ummo.

Mump (Michael Kennard) is the happy idiot to Smoot's (John Turner) haughty know-it-all. These are the odd couple of Ummo, sleeping next to each other in identical cocoon-like hammocks in a strange underworld affair where pulling a clanking chain brings on the day – and yanked again, the night. Their god is also named Ummo, and the pair are careful to genuflect before its idol – a green and red metallic cone – each time they pass by. Otherwise, their day is made up of mere survival – catching food and making 'sloop' – the blue liquid they drink.

With nonsense for a script (although the duo do slip into a fair bit of English along the way), the comedy is necessarily physical. Much hilarity, for example, comes from the simple act of catching and eating breakfast – a pair of rubber rats, beaten vigorously, shaken in a bucket of sloop, then swallowed whole.

But, like all good clown acts, scratch the greasepaint and a well of pathos bubbles up. Mump drinks from the wrong bottle of sloop and the more sinister fabric of life on Ummo takes over. Faced with his friend's gradual demise (helped along by a gruesomely funny amputation scene), Smoot's true colours show. To save Mump, he will try the unthinkable: defying the god Ummo, even in the face of the ever-growing blue egg that threatens their very existence. They love each other, this pair.

Eight years may have passed since Kennard and Turner's last outing as Mump and Smoot, but on Wednesday – the world premiere of *Cracked* – they didn't miss a beat reinhabiting their creations. Taking on any hapless audience member who uttered a gasp, sigh or any other slightly too loud exclamation, the pair seemed entirely at home in their fictional abode. (Be careful if you take an aisle seat – they are quite liberal with the use of their rubber clubs.)

They manage to balance the belly laughs with the more poignant moments – even combining both in a pitch perfect ukelele-playing scene – but there is some unevenness in the plot. The last third of the show has to work too hard to maintain its own logic, with an excellent nightmarish sequence trumping a far weaker ending, despite the best efforts of puppeteers Zu-Ma: Talent to Amuz. And, although the bursts of English make life easier on the audience, they become so plentiful as the show progresses, they threaten to undermine the artistic ambition of the project.

Not that the audience on Wednesday night cared: They hooted and hollered and stamped their feet and welcomed Mump and Smoot back to the stage with open arms.

Mump and Smoot: Cracked runs in Vancouver until June 5 (www.thecultch.com). It plays at Magnetic North in Kitchener-Waterloo, Ont., from June 9-13 (magneticnorthfestival.ca), and at Theatre Network in Edmonton in October (attheroxy.com).