

The Boston Globe

As seen in Terry Byrne's "Stages" column, published August 23, 2018

Monkey in the middle

Ken Prestininzi describes his new play "Timbuktu, USA" as a "gothic farce."

"I love the notion of using unexpected combinations of objects or symbols to create the drama," says Prestininzi, who is directing the Boston premiere of his play Aug. 25-Sept. 1 at Boston Playwrights' Theatre, in a Sleeping Weazel production.

"Timbuktu, USA," he says, follows a woman whose quest for power turns on her, thanks in no small part to an escaped monkey and a virgin. It's a mash-up of comedy and horror, set in the world of power politics.

"Sometimes," Prestininzi says, "our fascination with power gets the better of us. When we think we're in control, and try to treat life as a game where we control the rules, that's exactly the moment when things spiral away from us."

Yes, it is a political comedy with consequences, but don't worry if you don't quite get it. The thrill of Prestininzi's plays — including the mesmerizing "Birth Breath Bride Elizabeth" (ArtsEmerson), and "Ugmo and Eenie Go Down the Ruski Hole" (Sleeping Weazel) — involves his skill with language, combined with his ability to take quirky objects and idiosyncrasies and transform them into surprisingly dramatic material.

"I love the notion of those old 'Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein' movies," says Prestininzi. "It's the idea of the innocent child or clown placed in a high-stakes situation. My work emerges from the tradition of Maria Irene Fornés and Samuel Beckett. I love the idea of the clown who responds to a situation by performing tasks with objects. Think of Charlie Chaplin's 'The Tramp' and his efforts to eat and sleep."

Symbolism allows "the audience to make the connections themselves," he says. "There's a real pleasure in those discoveries. It's something audiences respond to in a refreshingly child-like way."

"Timbuktu, USA" is Prestininzi's third collaboration with Sleeping Weazel (he also directed "27 Tips for Banishing the Blues") and is one of the many artists affiliated with the company.

"Our mission," says Sleeping Weazel artistic director Charlotte Meehan, "is to present new works that provide a necessary critique of the current [presidential] administration, ongoing racism, and other social ills that plague our country. I want Sleeping Weazel productions to be entertaining as hell and to ignite a fire in our audiences. 'Timbuktu' is drop-dead hilarious while also being a strong call to action."