

'The Big Bang' boils down to a talented duo at Performance Network



Zev Steinberg, Jeff English and Matt Gwynn in "The Big Bang." (Photo by Chris Purchie)

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Think of "The Big Bang" – a 2 man musical comedy with a **limited run at the recently re-opened Performance Network Theatre** (http://www.mlive.com/entertainment/ann-arbor/index.ssf/2014/08/performance_network_theatre_wi.html)

(following a more extensive run at Williamston Theatre) – as an amuse-bouche: a small taste of what PNT's new management aims to bring to the stage this season.

The 80 minute show, with music by Jed Feuer and book and lyrics by Boyd Graham, assumes the guise of a pitch meeting for potential investors/backers, held in the art-and knick-knack packed apartment of a Manhattan-based proctologist. The show's 2 creators, Boyd (Matthew Gwynn) and Jed (Zev Steinberg) boisterously perform highlights from their 12 hour, too-big-to-not-fail show, "The Big Bang," which has a projected budget of over 500 million dollars and tells our collective story – from the beginning of time to the present.

Yes, similar to the way your high school history teacher desperately tried to cram everything that happened after World War I into the last week of school, "The Big Bang" mashes cosmology with biblical stories and historic figures and events.

Director Rob Roznowski and his cast – including musical director Jeff English, who provides on-stage accompaniment (plus an occasional dash of sass) by way of a keyboard – make the most of the material, which is often witty, but which also threatens to become redundant, given the show's premise and structure, and which jokingly employs cultural caricatures that some may deem offensive.

Even so, Gwynn and Steinberg play off each other beautifully, making some pretty complicated lyrical passages look effortless while hopping like bunnies or dashing about the stage to clean up their mess (a stage manager's dream). Plus, they fluidly shift between genders and accents with a winking sense of fun, and Steinberg plays what may be the only example of jazz shofar I've yet witnessed.

But another key player in "The Big Bang" is prop master Bruce Bennett, who furnishes the Lipbalm's apartment with objects and artworks that Jed and Boyd can grab in a pinch while selling their show; the apartment thus becomes a whimsical playland for the characters' imagination, and this self-conscious theatricality significantly adds to "The Big Bang"'s sense of fun.

Another major contributor is costume designer Karen Kangas-Preston, who provides costumes versatile enough to accommodate multiple quick-changes on stage as well as prop-accessorizing (a pillow or a clock that becomes a hat, curtains that become a toga

or a scarf, or – my favorite – large umbrellas that become a Southern belle's hoop skirted frock).

And while Gwynn and Steinberg make it appear as though their characters are controlling the lights throughout their fast-moving presentation, Alex Gay masterfully designed "The Big Bang"'s lighting, while Kirk Domer designed the all-white apartment set, and Shannon T. Schweitzer designed the often self consciously kitschy media that accompanies Jed and Boyd's pitch.

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wisely, the big bang's creators cut to the chase when the snow's central joke starts wearing too thin; and while the script's humor is more often cute than hilarious, the cast and crew manage to amp up the laughs by way of smart choices and solid execution.

In the end, however, what sustains you is the act of watching 2 passionate artists whose vision has driven them over the deep end. What these men want, they'll never be able to have; the pleasure of the dream will always eclipse reality.

Understandably, getting to live in their crazy dream for a while has its appeal.

Performances of "The Big Bang" take place Thursday through Sunday through August 31. To purchase tickets, go to www.pntheatre.org (<http://www.pntheatre.org>) or call the box office at 734-663-0681.

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