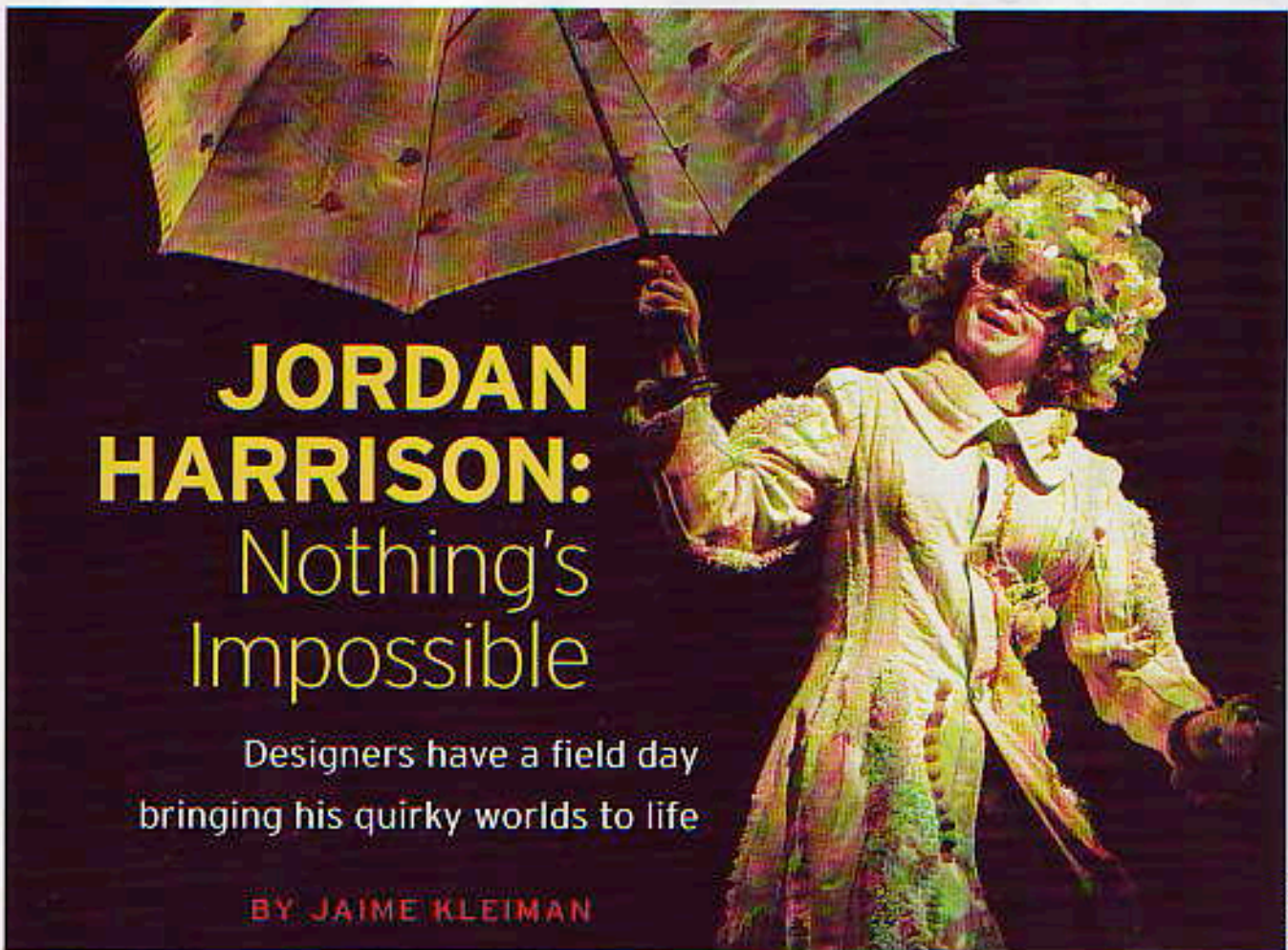


# JORDAN HARRISON: Nothing's Impossible

Designers have a field day bringing his quirky worlds to life

BY JAIME KLEIMAN



Michael Ray Escamilla in Harrison's *Kid-Simple*, a radio play in the flesh at the Humana Festival in Louisville, Ky.

Jordan Harrison can't come up for air. Since he received his MFA in playwriting from Brown University in 2003, Harrison has been busier in three years than most writers expect to be in ten, racking up awards, workshops and readings all over the country.

"I remember meeting him when he was 23, and thinking, 'Good lord, how will I ever keep up with him?'" declares Paula Vogel, Harrison's mentor at Brown. Her instincts about him proved prophetic.

Immediately upon graduation, Harrison won a Jerome Foundation fellowship to work with the Playwrights' Center, which brought him to Minneapolis, where he currently resides. A year later, he landed another Jerome, and for 2006 he caught the big fish—a \$25,000 award in the form of a McKnight Foundation Advancement Grant. These grants have allowed him to work full time as a playwright for the past three years, enhancing his prolificacy and contributing to his ongoing success. "I have the sweepstakes approach to being a playwright," Harrison laughs. "Unlike some other playwrights, I just send things off. I haven't self-produced my work."

At 28, the Seattle native has already had three of his plays produced at the Actors Theatre of Louisville's esteemed Humana Festival of New American Plays. His first submit-

sion, a 10-minute play called *Fit for Feet*, was a co-winner of the 2003 Heideman Award.

Harrison's first full-length play at Humana was *Kid-Simple, a radio play in the flesh*, a kind of action-fable about a plucky teenage girl who creates a machine that hears things that can't be heard: toenails growing on a field mouse, the drop of a pin in a haystack, the sound of a heart breaking. The challenge for the actors is to make the fast-paced, highly imaginative plot believable. *Kid-Simple* is also an adventure for its sound designers (Bray Poor and Darron L. West at Humana), whose task it is to produce snippets of radio commercials and old-time radio melodramas, as well as noises like a tiger's growl that represents stifled teenage libido. Most of this is meant to be produced live.

By necessity, Harrison's writing is quirky and self-assured—his scripts wouldn't work any other way. Even when he tries to write naturalistically, things quickly turn fantastical; it seems he just can't help himself. In *Finn in the Underworld*, for example, he wanted to do what he was not traditionally good at doing. "I thought I'd write a realistic play, but it became a ghost story," he explains with a shrug. The house's walls close in on the characters as *Finn* progresses, symbolizing the nature of their claustrophobic environment and their inability to deal with grief.

"Each play is like an aria for a different kind of designer," Harrison says of his work. "Designers probably think I'm impudent, but they're excited by my plays. I'm asking for ingeniousness, but not necessarily high technology." (The moving walls in *Form*, for example, were achieved in the 2005 Berkeley Repertory Theatre premiere, with set design by David Korins, by three stagehands' muscle power and audible grunting.) "The unusualness of my plays is part of what gets them produced," Harrison theorizes, then adds after a pause, "It's luck, too, because I think they're unknowable until you actually see them."

HARRISON IS SCRUPULOUSLY OBSESSIVE with his words: how they look on the page, how they form in the mouth, how stage design can help and hinder them. Polly Carl, producing artistic director at the Playwrights' Center, believes his work poses "a challenge for directors because of the specificity of his worlds. His writing stands out as a voice we haven't heard before, and it's also very challenging to stage. Any theatre artist's dream would be to make those complexities come alive."

The center has been instrumental in developing Harrison's career, connecting him to literary managers, theatres and festivals he wouldn't have had access to otherwise. Last month he and three other writers attached to the center had their plays translated into Japanese and workshopped at the Tokyo International Arts Festival. *Act a Lady*—at the Humana Festival through April 1—was also chosen for Tokyo. "I don't envy the translator," Harrison says, half-jokingly.

*Act a Lady* tells the story of a handful of men in a small Prohibition-era town who decide to put on a play, Elizabethan-style, dressed up in "fancy women-type clothes." The entire town reacts with a mix of amusement and confusion: Women's garments get nicked, gender becomes convoluted and identities intermingle, all accompanied by live accordion. It's rare that a gender-bending, tongue-in-cheek comedy is able to pull on the heartstrings while being intellectually stimulating, but *Lady* does just that.

Adrien-Alice Hansel, literary manager at Actors Theatre and dramaturg for *Lady*'s Humana production, describes the play as a "thoughtful, exuberant Midwestern fable about the woman in every man, the man in every woman, and the power of theatre to uncover both." Of course, it's also a bit of



a drag show. In the second act, the women play the men's roles and the men's female performances become the reality. It's a play-within-a-play-within-a-play, amplified by ridiculous curly-haired wigs, high heels and carefully applied lipstick.

*Lady* began as a commission for the Commonwealth Theatre Company in Lanesboro, Minn., which asked Harrison to write

a play about its community or some aspect of its history. So he spent some time in the picturesque town (pop. 800), trying out such small-town activities as attending a cattle auction with fellow playwright Janet Allard. Michael Bigelow Dixon, the Guthrie Theater's literary director, pointed Harrison in the direction of a museum that housed photographs of cross-dressing men from 1927. That got Harrison thinking: "What was it like to come back from the farm and dress up in women's clothes? What would it be like to be queer in a small town and have your swish suddenly celebrated? How did this affect their lives?" And *Lady* was born.

NOT ONE TO REST ON HIS LAURELS, Harrison is already working on a new play for Providence, R.I.'s Perishable Theatre called *Amazons and Their Men*. He's also writing *Doris to Darlene*, a cautionary valentine for Seattle's Empty Space Theatre, where he is a playwright-in-residence as part of the NEA/TCG Theatre Residency Program for Playwrights. Described by Harrison as a "time-jumping pop fairy tale," *Doris* takes the music of 1960s girl groups and puts it on



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Clifton Guterman, foreground, with, in background from left, Lorri Holt, Randy Danson and Reed Birney in Harrison's *Finn in the Underworld* at California's Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

a cacophonous collision course with Richard Wagner's *Liebertod*.

Empty Space associate artistic director Adam Greenfield says Harrison's "dark

theatricality" fits in nicely with the mission of their company, a theatre that relies more heavily on language than on smoke and mirrors. "The audacity and ambition of his work,

its ineluctable theatricality, are in tune with the 'impossible theatre' we like to produce," says Greenfield. "We are eager to integrate Jordan into the life of our community as much as we can."

For the Empty Space, Harrison has dreamed up another "impossible" idea, the Postcard Plays—commissioning plays that are literally written on 4-by-6-inch postcards. The plays can be scripted, designed or drawn, but the authors were instructed to keep in mind that they should ultimately be performable.

"I think wordplay is a big part of my identity as a playwright," Harrison muses. "I often think of a conversation I had with a friend when I was 19. I said, 'I think maybe I'd like to be a playwright, but I don't think I can write the way people talk.' And the friend said, 'Why do you need to write the way people talk?'"

Minneapolis-based arts reporter **Jaime Kleiman** is a 2004-05 *American Theatre* Affiliated Writer, with support from a grant by the Jerome Foundation.

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