

# Home on a very weird range

The tale of three backwoods brothers and their country-singing sister, *Thunderstruck* is energetic and inventive

**THEATRE**  
**KATE TAYLOR**

**Thunderstruck**  
Written by Daniel Danis  
Directed by Blake Brooker  
Starring Denise Clarke, Andy Curtis, Michael Green and Elizabeth Stepkowski  
At the Factory Theatre in Toronto  
Rating: ★★★

Trust the rabbits to hop into town with some of the weirdest theatre going. To visit Toronto's Factory Theatre these days and experience *Thunderstruck*, the latest offering from Calgary's One Yellow Rabbit troupe, is to enter some utterly other world. The strains of both *Deliverance* and *Howly Doodly* can be heard here, but this black and bi-

zarre family fable written by Quebec's Daniel Danis is also uniquely its own. Dressed in identical green boiler suits, Rabbit regulars Denise Clarke, Andy Curtis and Michael Green play three backwoods brothers, joined in "lasting love" since the death of their parents during an electrical storm. The same cataclysm has turned their sister, Naomi, into a country singer: Elizabeth Stepkowski opens the show in that role, dressed like some over-primped Raggedy Ann, moving like a windup toy and singing like Patsy Cline on helium.

But she will soon reappear as a much limper doll when Naomi is dragged home in a comatose state after several years on the road. Her brothers think she's drunk and leave her in the drive to dry out, but when they realize that's not working, they rig up a scaffolding on which to hang her up, and begin to look after her in their own inimita-

ble way. Prying neighbours are horrified by their care and fascinated when word gets around that Naomi glows in the dark.

Using a rolling, metal frame as both the family's storm-ravaged house and as Naomi's cage, the troupe performs this story with their signature physicality and cohesion, bounding about the stage with an energy that is amusingly broad and disturbingly maniacal.

Directed by Blake Brooker, all the performances are strong, but Clarke (a dancer and choreographer who also takes credit for staging the show) stands out from the rest. Rarely do you see drag casting used so effectively as it is in this performance, where Clarke not only masters male posture and mannerisms but adds to them an unsettling oddness because of the very fact that she is a woman.

Like the performances, the words are also muscular and outlandish. As translated into a workable pidgin English by Linda Gaboriau, Danis's language is part biblical and part baby talk. Trips to the local brothel "untense the itch," while one brother orders another to "unmad your eyes." The performers

speaking all this as naturally as a mother tongue while switching effortlessly between dialogue and expository narrative.

What's less powerful is the thematic structure of the script, which in its weirdness leaves certain images unexplained and certain developments unexplored. In particular, the say-sayer (a box into which the brothers speak and which gives the play its subtitle, *Song of the Say-Sayer*) hints at a metaphor as powerful as the famous conch shell in *Lord of the Flies*, but never delivers. Meanwhile, both Naomi's singing career and her final fate are not rendered with sufficient detail. In this hazy narrative, which is overextended in some places and rushed in others, the true horror of *Thunderstruck* goes missing.

The achievement of both this script and the One Yellow Rabbit interpretation is that the story is told exclusively but affectively from the brothers' blinkered view; the lack is that the darkness of their isolated world is not loaded with all the dramatic weight it could carry.

To Dec. 10 at Factory Theatre in Toronto; (416) 504-9971.



*Thunderstruck* director Blake Brooker, at rear, with cast members (from left) Denise Clarke, Michael Green and Andy Curtis: All the performances are strong, but Clarke, playing a man, stands out.

# The thinking man's horror flick

**FILM**  
**LIAM LACEY**

**Crack, Brutal Grief**  
Written and directed by R. Bruce Elder  
Classification: NA

R. Bruce Elder is regarded, among the more rarefied circles of experimental film, as a genius. His dense, multilayered films, made over the past 25 years, combine cinematic images, animation, music and text, and address the big issues: technology, the body, God, history and the fragmentation of consciousness.

His work is rhythmic, complex and, while obviously intellectual, also religious. His films aim to reclaim a state that is preverbal, when the direct apprehension of the whole of existence leads to an awareness of the Creator.

His latest film, *Crack, Brutal Grief* (created with the assistance of Toronto filmmakers Ilana Gutman, Izabella Prushka-Oldenhof, Maria Rpponi, Jeremy Elder-Jubelin and Greg Boa) has its first Toronto screening tonight through the auspices of Cinematheque Ontario. In a distinct departure from his previous work, it is a compilation film, gleaned from images on the Internet. Much of it is a true-life horror show of a kind that many people will probably find too offensive even to consider.

But the film is not intended to be shocking, as much as it attempts to diagnose why we are already in a state of shock, numbed and unfeeling.



*Crack, Brutal Grief* offers gore for someone's strange amusement.

Elder's investigation began with the suicide of one of his long-time friends. The friend's death led him to the Internet, where suicide advice and images of casual death are readily available. Starting with what he calls the "Web's banalization of suffering," he created a kind of journey into horror, through which the viewer travels as Elder attempts to find the dignity behind the images of degradation so freely available on the Net. At the same time, the filmmaker, who is also a professor at Toronto's Iyerson Polytechnic University, treats the Web as a snapshot of the contemporary consciousness, with all of its frag-

mentation and obsessive interest in sex, technology and death.

The film begins with the animated silhouette of a dancer, moving rhythmically to a bouncing blues piano tune. This image becomes a kind of touchstone — of the creative, happy body functioning in the world. At times, the figure reappears — split in two, twisted or torn apart — to various kinds of music. To use a phrase from one of Elder's heroes, William Blake, it represents the "human form divine" that is our gift from God.

The imagery that the film plunges into is the human form at the demonic extreme. There are

images of battlefield corpses, a man struck by a train, bodies dismembered and posed for someone's strange amusement. These are juxtaposed with images of the carnage of wars, the global-annihilation threat of the Cuban missile crisis, and black-humour, pop-culture references from *The Simpsons* and *Monty Python*.

Although the context of this carefully edited and stylized film renders these images somewhat abstract, the impact is still intensely disturbing, but structured enough to raise questions more than simple disgust: Can we reasonably talk about the defilement and desecra-

tion of bodies if we don't acknowledge their sacredness or, at least, their dignity?

Along with the soundtrack, there are other streams of information: scenes of hard-core pornography; a meditative text that crawls along the bottom of the screen, pondering the nature of abandonment from God; a recurring spiral of text in the middle of the screen, all hurtling forward. For a non-narrative film more than two hours in length, *Crack, Brutal Grief* maintains a constant sense of forward urgency.

Along the way, Elder establishes that even the most horrific images, in a compassionate and aesthetic context, can trigger a sense of mourning and sorrow, rather than simple disgust.

After his stream of imagery goes through its darkest view of humanity, it emerges again, suggesting the

possibility of joy. The choice of image of dancing women, both erotic and symbolic of life, reasserts itself as the film draws to a close.

The questions that are raised, especially about the nature of modern repression, run deep. Liberated from old-fashioned shame and modesty, Elder's film suggests that we've given ourselves licence to walk into a different kind of prison. The problem is not that anything goes; it's that nothing matters.

*Crack, Brutal Grief* screens at 6:30 tonight at Jackman Hall at the Art Gallery of Ontario, 317 Dundas St. W. For information, call Cinematheque Ontario at (416) 968-FILM. Tickets, which are free but restricted to those 18 and over, will be given out at the theatre on a first-come, first-served basis starting at 6 p.m.

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