

Neal Medlyn And Kathleen Hanna Talk 'Wicked Clown Love'

By Mehan Jayasuriya



It's an early Friday evening in Williamsburg, Brooklyn and as the bars and restaurants open their doors, well-dressed young adults begin to slowly trickle in. Meanwhile, just down the street from the Brooklyn Brewery, a group of performance artists are huddled in a nondescript rehearsal space, donning clown makeup, masks and Psychopathic Records t-shirts. To the casual observer, it might look like these folks are suiting up to attend a performance by the Insane Clown Posse (ICP)—the comically violent Detroit hip-hop group whose fans dress up as clowns and refer to themselves as “Juggalos”. That’s not the case, however: these performers are getting ready to stage an Insane Clown Posse *musical*.

“Wicked Clown Love,” the brainchild of NYC-based performance artist Neal Medlyn, opens at the Kitchen on February 2nd. In the performance, Medlyn and his merry band of Juggalos serve as tour guides through the “Dark Carnival,” the mythological underworld that the Insane Clown Posse sketched out over the course of six albums (or “Joker’s Cards,” as they are referred to in the ICP parlance). Along the way, the performers rap and sing reworked versions of ICP numbers like “Halls of Illusions” and “What is a Juggalo?” that bleed into tracks from sensitive singer-songwriters like Cat Stevens and Bon Iver. True to ICP-style, gratuitous violence, misogyny and rapid-fire curses are juxtaposed with dick jokes and fart noises. Medlyn and his fellow performers present all of this with a straight face.

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In recent years, “Juggalo” has become a synonym for “lowest-common-denominator” among web-savvy, urban sophisticates. After the Insane Clown Posse’s music video for “Miracles” went viral, Juggalo culture, which had previously been pretty insular, found itself the subject of increasing external scrutiny. Music critics traveled to the Gathering of the Juggalos—a yearly music festival held in rural Illinois that serves as a sort of pilgrimage for ICP fans—and returned with a catalog of atrocities: mud wrestling, drunken debauchery, drugs offered in exchange for sexual favors, a topless Tila Tequila being pelted with rocks and dildos. Others, like Hive’s own Christopher Weingarten, came back with fond stories of good-natured drug use and friendly, accepting fans.

Medlyn was among the outsiders who traveled to the Gathering of the Juggalos last year. Unlike most non-Juggalos who went, however, he came back with a very different impression of the festival. “It was really great, we had a really great time,” Medlyn says. “I think [going to the Gathering] really helped the piece happen and not just be a lecture about Juggalo culture or something like that.” Unlike the critics who attended the event on assignment, Medlyn went as a casual observer; unfettered by the journalist-subject dynamic, he was able to more easily ingratiate himself with the Juggalos. “It seemed like they were cool with us being there,” Medlyn says. “I don’t think they thought we were too off the mark or whatever.” Medlyn’s faint remnants of a Texas accent may have helped—despite the ICP’s origins in Detroit, Juggalos largely hail from rural locales.

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Upon returning to New York, Medlyn set to work on “Wicked Clown Love,” writing and revising the script and planning out the musical numbers over the course of a few months. When it came time to design the stage set, he turned to an unlikely source: Kathleen Hanna, the feminist punk icon who fronted Bikini Kill, Le Tigre and The Julie Ruin. Medlyn and Hanna play softball together and have been mutual admirers of each other’s work for years; Hanna also designed the set for a previous Medlyn production in which her husband, Beastie Boy Adam Horovitz, was a performer. “I was really interested to know that a lot of women and girls go to the Gathering of the Juggalos, so it obviously isn’t just for men, but it *really* isn’t something I am into,” Hanna says. “What I *am* into is the way Neal portrays an incredibly complicated version of masculinity in his work. He also delves deeply into male friendships, men’s disabilities in terms of communication and the way they manage to build small, beautiful things within some pretty tight social constraints.” When it came time to design the set, Hanna drew inspiration from her own personal history: “I grew up in suburbs and tiny towns where the most exciting thing was walking to the gas station to buy Andy Capp Hot Fries out of a machine, so I used those experiences a lot.”

Anyone hoping to look down their nose at Juggalos will be disappointed by “Wicked Clown Love”; though it’s often funny, Medlyn’s sincere interest in and affection for Juggalo culture always shines through. ICP fans, meanwhile, may be surprised to hear old favorites in new ways: in many cases, Medlyn has stripped the songs down to their emotional core and rebuilt them in a way that neutralizes their defensive bluster. “Miracles,” is so transformed into an earnest, even naïve, appreciation for the world around us, while “Halls of Illusions” becomes a tale of vigilante justice. A great deal of the show also deals with the bonds formed between straight men

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within the Juggalo tribe—Medlyn was influenced by Robert Bly’s *Iron John: A Book About Men* while working on the script for “Wicked Clown Love” and a number of the author’s poems appear in the performance.



To be sure, “Wicked Clown Love” is a bold move for Medlyn, a love letter, of sorts, to a culture that’s been relegated to the fringes of society. However, those with at least a passing familiarity with Juggalo culture and the ICP catalog will find much to love in Medlyn’s thought-provoking look at ICP fandom. “I find it interesting that Neal, who is from a small town Texas, is presenting the art of ICP in a totally non-ironic way for a NYC art audience,” Hanna says. “I think it is an aggressive move that will bring up a lot of questions, mainly about who can afford to buy sophistication. I hope the Juggalos like it because Neal is dead serious about this stuff and has a real love for the songs.”

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