

SOCIAL INTERCOURSE

GrimSkunk

with Mervyn Albin and First Aid Kit
Friday, 14 September at 8pm
Starlite Room

Formed in 1988, GrimSkunk played a pivotal role in establishing Quebec's alternative scene along with Groovy Aardvark, their similarly monikered brethren. Incorporating punk, rock, and several other genres along with a selection of languages, these feisty vermin just released *Fires Under the Road*. The album is being hailed by fans as a return to their original sound after their last release led to accusations of selling out—though I'm not sure how many people would take you seriously if you told them that GrimSkunk totally sold out.

Giselle

National Ballet of Canada Performance
18-19 September at 8pm
Jubilee Auditorium

We've all seen it: that eye-opening and attention-grabbing ad in the LRT station of the ballet girl being covered up by two male dancers. Instead of awkwardly staring at that while waiting for the train, why not take in the actual ballet? It's definitely more socially acceptable and, like the ad proclaims, allows you to get closer to the action.

Giselle tells the tale of a peasant girl whose lover cheats on her. Heartbroken, she dies and ends up in the world of Wilis, a land for deceived women. The role of Giselle is also known in the world of ballet as one of the most technically demanding in the business, so expect a good show.

Ladysmith Black Mambazo

Saturday, 15 September at 8pm
Winspear Centre

When you've been referenced in a *Family Guy* joke, you know you've hit it big—at least with mainstream culture—but this quintessential African singing group has always been significant to their home country of South Africa. Running since 1960 and still led by the man who started it, the group 's amassed an impressive collection of over a dozen Grammys and even an Academy Award. They've also recorded over 50 albums, making the concept of being a Mambazo completist sounds like an exercise in masochism.

Mavis Staples

Sunday, 16 September at 3pm
Winspear Centre

A 40-year veteran in the music business, soul legend and civil rights activist Mavis Staples graces the Winspear stage this week. Called "the epitome of soul" by fellow soul rock heavyweight Prince, Mrs Staples is touring in support of her new album *Have a Little Faith*. The show is a tribute to another famous American soul and gospel singer, Mahalia Jackson.

Green Planet Concert Series Featuring Art Garfunkel

Sunday, 16 September at 7:30pm
Jubilee Auditorium

The lovable, afro-sporting half of Simon and Garfunkel is hitting Edmonton this weekend with his own mini version of Live Earth. The Green Planet Concert series benefits the Pembina Institute, an environmental think-tank that deals with policy research related to sustainable development and climate change.

JOHN KMECH
Loves Ween's Quebec album



Nights of the improvising dead

Mark Meer and Kurt Smeaton discuss staying on a stage for 53 hours—and the ensuing hallucinations

theatrepreview

Die-Nasty's 53-Hour Improvised Soap-A-Thon

Starts Friday, 14 September at 6pm and runs until Sunday, 16 September at 11pm
Varscona Theatre

Tickets available at the Vascona box office

PAUL BLINOV
Arts & Entertainment Editor

"It's a lot of fun ... wait. I've got to come up with a better ending quote than 'It's a lot of fun,' Mark Meer, longtime Die-Nasty cast member, fumbles. A pause. "It's like doing acid!" he tries, before giving up. "It's whatever."

The "it" in question is neither childlike play nor chemical drugs, although the unabashed silliness of the former and hallucinatory effects of the latter may show through; Meer is referring to Die-Nasty's annual 53-hour improvised Soap-A-Thon, wherein a double-digit cast attempt to coherently improvise a storyline for more than two days straight. While audiences can doze off—and, if they've purchased a weekend pass, leave and come back whenever they choose—most of the cast are dedicated to keeping their eyelids open the entire time.

Meer, who first completed the gruelling weekend more than a decade ago (and every year thereafter) seems comfortable at the thought of another weekend of self-imposed insomnia. In fact, he seems all too eager to do it once more.

"It just gets easier every year," Meer explains. "This is the eleventh time I've done it all the way through ... I think it just wears a new groove in your brain [that] just allows you to snap into that and keep going. And remain coherent."

The basic plot is already laid out: this year, the on-stage action will revolve around the fictional town of Cadaver, where a big-city film crew has arrived to begin shooting a zombie movie. As the hours drag on and the plot thickens endlessly, specialty hours occur, such as the intriguing Hours of Gratuitous Nudity, which offers sex-free naked bodies, and the G-rated Family Hours, which offer wholesome fun for all ages.

"Basically, we create an entire self-sustaining universe that we then ultimately destroy. It's just a great experience, lots of fun ... getting to play a character for that long, you really get to explore the different narratives and all the ins and outs of the character."

MARK MEER
DIE-NASTY CAST MEMBER

Besides these themed, potentially buck naked moments, the weekend is a very condensed version of Die-Nasty's regular weekly soap opera. But Meer welcomes the lengthy weekend in its own right as the longest chance he gets to remain in a character.

"[What keeps me going is] just getting to live in that world," Meer says. "Basically, we create an entire self-sustaining universe that we then ultimately destroy. It's just a great experience, lots of fun ... getting to play a character for that long, you really get to explore the different narratives and all the ins and outs of the character."

Kurt Smeaton, an actor from the now defunct

Holmes Show and current Soap-A-Thon player, echoes this sentiment.

"[The Soap-A-Thon] becomes this real study in how to sustain a character," he notes. "By the end of the show, you're no longer making up history; there's so much shared history with the cast and your character that you no longer have to make anything up; everything's already happened [onstage] ... you're referencing points from before."

Smeaton's returning from Toronto to make his second stab at the Soap-A-Thon after getting hooked last year, and he's not the only out-of-towner to make the trek. The Soap-A-Thon's become what Meer refers to as "an improv pilgrimage," drawing the bravest improvisers from around the world to put their theatrical stamina to the test. And as Smeaton notes, not all of them hold up so well.

"There was a group from England last year ... and the [Soap-A-Thon]'s theme last year was the wedding," he recalls. "At one point I had taken all the wedding gifts offstage, and one of the guys backstage said 'Good idea!' and started punching the wall. I asked 'What are you doing?' and he said 'I thought I was supposed to beat up that robot.' He had actually started hallucinating."

There's the acid trip Meer referred to, and when you consider the sheer immensity of 53 hours—that's 190 800 seconds—perhaps his hurried words at the end of our phone call ring completely true: by pushing its improvisers to such an extreme, the Soap-A-Thon can truly only be described as "whatever."

Check out next Thursday's Gateway to read Arts & Entertainment Editor Paul Blinov's account of taking in the Soap-A-Thon in its entirety, armed only with a laptop and a few changes of clothing.