

# Review: '1-800-MICE' at The Annex Theater

By

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On Black Friday, [The Annex Theater](#) (“Annex”) invited Baltimore to “celebrate anti-consumerism and new art” by attending the World Premiere of *1-800-MICE*, an adaptation of Brooklyn artist [Matthew Thurber](#)’s graphic novel of the same name. Baltimore responded in force; a jam-packed house, including Matthew Thurber himself, watched as the once-comic book series played out onstage. Adapted for the stage by Annex’s own Carly J. Bales and Sarah Jacklin, *1-800-MICE* is smart, weird, funny and surprisingly timely considering its first installment was written nearly a decade ago.

*1-800-MICE* deals with the plight of Volcano Park, a “seething interspecies metropolis” that is home to humans, evolved animals and trees that not only speak, but are in charge of things. The city has a lot of familiar problems. It has a classist social structure in which wealthy narcissists do battle with each other, grasping vainly at immortality, at the expense of the everyman. There’s a simmering class war; rampant drug abuse; a bellicose police force; skilled assassins; a dangerous, though fashionable, gang; and a death cult. Oh, there’s also a visible-in-the-sky meteor on a collision course with Earth. It’s an apocalypse waiting to happen.

It is in this setting that we meet the denizens of Volcano Park. It’s difficult to go into detail without spoilers, but the numerous characters have interesting storylines that cross and

interconnect to tell a multi-layered tale. I was, in fact, a bit concerned when I read in the program that each member of the eight-person cast was playing so many roles – an average of four, but ranging up to seven – and would disappear and then “rapidly reappear... some in disguise.” It was unexpectedly easy to follow, though; a feat I credit to Director Sarah Jacklin, her flexible, talented cast, and innovative Costume Designer Nicolette Le Faye. Le Faye’s costumes were no more complex than they had to be, yet they served to differentiate the characters well. Her work on the three sushi chefs was both ingenious and hilarious.



Playing the sushi chefs, Annex company member Dave Iden displays excellent comic timing. Charged with the most roles of anyone in the cast, Iden plays all his characters with energy and flair. It’s no wonder that [City Paper](#) named him “Best Character Actor” in its 2016 rankings.



*Nina Kearon as Groomfiend. Photo courtesy of The Annex Theater.*

Nina Kearin plays, among other roles, the evolved mouse, Groomfiend. Her portrayal of the newest employee of the eponymous 1-800-MICE courier service is charming. She really seems mouse-like to me: cute and unassuming, but capable of thriving despite chaos and traveling through unconventional passageways. Groomfiend also serves as a part time narrator for the piece, a task Kearin incorporates handily.

I didn't realize until after the show that Jacob Zabawa played both the pure-of-heart, gender non-binary mouse named Peace Punk *and* Dr. Vial, the megalomaniacal leader of a doomsday suicide cult. Zabawa's ability to switch between disparate roles – four, in total – is a noteworthy indicator of his talent.



*Alexander Scalley as L.A. Shogun. Photo courtesy of The Annex Theater.*

Carly J. Bales, as Aunty Lakeford; Alexander Scally, as L.A. Shogun; and Dave Iden, as The Great Partaker, skillfully portray long-term rivals. Philip Rogers and Martin Kasey, who play Officer Nabb and his brother Anecdote, respectively, also give strong performances. And Suzie Doogan, as Chlorie, captures the spirit of how I imagine the product of an inter-kingdom romance might act. (Think Species-Genus-Family, not Saudi Arabia or Jordan).

The technical side of 1-800-MICE was also well done. I found the set, conceived by Co-Set Designers Rick Gerriets and Daniel Marks, to be particularly clever. In a small space, multi-purpose set pieces are essential. I liked how the piano, which doubled as a coffee bar, tucked neatly under a lava-oozing second stage level that was, at various times, Volcano Park, Los Angeles and Scotland.

Equally well-designed was the wide backdrop onto which Projections Designer Rachel Dwiggins' excellent projections were screened. I was also pleased with Sound Designer David Crandall's choices. As an aging punk rock girl, it's always a welcome surprise to hear the dulcet tones of The Ramones and Agent Orange when I'm least expecting them.

If theater companies were people – you know, like corporations are – Annex would be Baltimore's Crown Prince of Weird. Not weird like that kid who's always eating paint chips and getting Legos stuck up his nose; weird like that guy who's the smartest person you know and who seems to view consensus reality as only one option among many. With the freedom that comes from embracing the creative unknown, Annex has amassed an impressive list of accomplishments since its founding in 2008. In only eight years, the company has produced more than 46 plays. These have included myriad new works, annually commissioned pieces, world premieres and “seemingly-impossible-to-adapt works.” And Shakespeare.

It has additionally undertaken three national tours, held numerous classes and workshops, and won an abundance of accolades including [Baltimore Magazine](#)'s 2016 Best Theater and [Baltimore City Paper](#)'s 2016 Best Company and Best Play. In its spare time, Annex has been spearheading the [Le Mondo](#) project, an initiative to foster a diverse community for artists, performers and arts organizations. Le Mondo is revitalizing the 400 block of N. Howard Street, repurposing a row of historic buildings to include “a black box theatre and dance space, affordable live/work apartments, workshop facilities, rehearsal space, classroom space, and a cafe.”

It's not often that you come across a company like [The Annex Theater](#). It's a risk to go all-in on bold, *avant-garde* projects – a risk that many companies simply can't afford to take. I'm glad that Baltimore, with our quirky love of the strange and wild, is the place that Annex calls home. Taking on the challenge of adapting and staging a bizarre comic with a cult following like *1-800-MICE* was a risk, but it is one that paid off beautifully. *1-800-MICE*

is a smart, absurd comedy that manages to be thought-provoking and topical while hurtling you through space at the speed of a meteor headed straight for Earth. Loosen your grip on narrative realism and go take this ride.

Shows like *1-800-MICE* don't happen every day; you want to make sure you're one of the folks who got to see it.

Running Time: 75 minutes, with no intermission.

