

ARTS

# POP DUST

## REVIEW | 'Soot and Spit': a fascinating look into the world of the differently able

*THEATRE | Our Voices at the New Ohio Theatre presents an inside look at the life and work of James Castle, an artist born deaf and autistic who never learned to speak, sign, or conventionally communicate*

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When dealing with the subject of disability in art, we are almost inevitably brought to it from the perspective of the observer of said disability. In *Rain Man* we see through the eyes of Tom Cruise's character, not Dustin Hoffman's. In *Of Mice and Men*, we experience the world from George's point of view, not Lennie's. In *A Day in the Death of Joe Egg*, we learn from the parents, and not the child. This is natural enough. It's easier to understand things that are other than ourselves when we are presented them through the lens of commonality. But what if you were to imagine a show that presented the world of the differently able from their point of view? With almost no context whatsoever? What would the experience be? It would be *Soot and Spit*, presented by Our Voices at the New Ohio Theatre.

A narrator (Chris Lopes) walks on to the stage. He briefly outlines the early life of James Castle (JW Guido), a man born deaf, autistic, and essentially mute in 1900. Despite attempts by those around him to get him to communicate via either speech or sign language, he chose instead to create art. James wrote and sketched using whatever materials were available to him, often using ink made of soot and his own spit. His creations included representations of the figures around him, sketches of the rural town in which he lived, and much more besides. We see many of these recreated on stage, both as exact replicas, and as figurative creations imaging what they looked like to him. Through these we are lead to question the

nature of art in relation to perspective, and pushed vehemently and unapologetically to see the world through his eyes.



Photo by Nina Wurtzel

*Soot and Spit* is a rare show, in that it's intent so intensely pure. It simply begs you to try and understand. In the same manner as an autistic person with speech and hearing impediments is dropped in to a world of talkers and listeners, we are dropped in to the world of James Castle. No forewarning, beyond a brief introduction, and occasional interludes of the world as we know it. We see him play with the paper dolls he makes, sketching food labels, we hear words interpreting his work as read and sung by the actors around him.

## **"JW Guido is an enthralling presence as Castle"**

There is a whole lot of something to this, as an experience. But you would never call it a conventional play, more of an art installation that you are encouraged to let

wash over you. Its segments are thrown at you with no obvious through line or narrative, enhancing the discombobulatory effects of the pieces. The audience is pushed to draw their own conclusions with as little judgement as possible. This is so completely admirable and selfless, and the time given over to it so overwhelming, it's enough to make you weep. And yet...

*Soot and Spit* comes off just a little too far in to esoteric territory in order to achieve its goals. Watched with no context the audience spends too much time having to guess what is being talked about and how it is presented to appreciate the finer nuances of the text or the visuals. The lack of plot structure drains the characters of discernible intent and the lack of clear stakes from moment to moment kills the drive of the play. It is difficult to watch and remain engaged all the way through, and this is problematic.

It's such a terrible shame, because everyone is clearly putting their all in to this. The story is told and performed and interpreted on all fronts with such care, and respect, and sheer love that it makes one want to rain down compliments with Thoric abandon. JW Guido is an enthralling presence as Castle. The supporting cast are working overtime through costume change, after musical number, after costume change. Designers Boyd Branch, Matthew Imhoff, Haley Peterson, Paul Miller, Leontine Greenberg and Andy Evan Cohen make the piece look and feel so lived in and loved, it is simply astonishing. Director Kim Weild brings so much that is so right to this piece. And yet as much as I want to love *Soot and Spit*, I only find myself admiring it from a gentle distance.



Photo by Nina Wurtzel

To level criticism at this play may feel, to some, to be leveling criticism at the conditions it depicts, and/or the conditions of some of the actors appearing on stage (JW Guido is deaf, Chris Lopes and Karen Ashino-Hara have down-syndrome), and/or the conditions of those working off-stage (Writer Charles Mee is physically disabled). That is not the case. Everyone involved in *Soot and Spit* has obviously worked their tails off. While the product is flawed, that does not take away from the purity of spirit behind it, the good it may yet do, the talent of the people involved, or the work of James Castle. People should be encouraged to see it for the sheer otherness it has to offer, but I would recommend research both before and after. This will allow the emotional comprehension that the play provides in spades to go hand in hand with the intellectual comprehension that it does not.