

THEATER: JOLLY GOOD FELLOW

'Jollyship the Whiz-Bang,' the pirate puppet rock opera, is musical theater with a mosh pit



By Leonard Jacobs

The retro pinstripe pants, the double-pocket white shirt, the hipster-signifying tie-and-jacket combo: As Nick Jones saunters down the center aisle at Ars Nova, an unsubtle smirk climbing up his face, he seems mischievous and childlike. There's something woozily sarcastic about him, too, as he grips the microphone and offers the goony prelude to *Jollyship the Whiz-Bang*.

Half the fun of the title is that it has so many meanings. For one, it's the name of the jamming hardcore rock band that vamps its way through the show. From pulsating, thrumming chords to ballads that melt into a full-tilt of caterwauls, wails and plaints, the music owes more to Black Flag than to Broadway. Created by lead vocalist Jones and keyboardist Raja Azar, two hangers-on for the Bindlestiff Family Circus, the band's website calls them a "pyrate puppet rock opera consortium."

But then there's the subtitle for *Jollyship*, the theater show: "a pirate puppet rock odyssey." This means you'll spend the night watching a multitude of genres sexing each other up to phenomenal results.

As there's a story to *Jollyship*, this is also musical theater. Jones, who wrote the terrifically off-kilter script, is credited with Azar as the show's co-creator, but it's hard to see how things would have coalesced into such a subversive theatrical mosh-pit without director Sam Gold balancing the elements.

At the center of the story is Clamp, an alcoholic Balinese puppet-pirate voiced by Jones who has been swilling his way across the seas in search of Party Island, a storied Babylon of babes and booze. You rarely notice Jones in character: Clamp is a dizzy and insulting prick whose surrounding cadre is so determinedly un-PC as to make Avenue Q's perky puppets look like Benedictine monks. But when Jones steps out of character, singing "Don't Mutiny (On Me)," "Tom" or "I Killed the Cabin Boy," he looks like a young David Byrne with a dose of Robert Morse and a dash of Adam Levine, his voice fueled by a heaping coke-spoonful of Fred Schneider and unquestionably channeling Iggy Pop when he thrashes.

While a veritable ocean of challenges face the inebriated Clamp over the arc of the show, it's when he goes clean that the comic tide washes in. Desperately missing Tom, his beloved cabin boy (a doll that's a dead ringer for Mr. Bill—oh no!), he thinks his crew, which threatens to mutiny, forced the callow youth to walk the plank. As he suffers through delirium tremens, however, Clamp discovers the truth. (A round of applause goes to designer Paul Burn, by the way, for his low-tech, high-impact approach to the puppetry.)

There's also a huge rainstorm, demonstrated through spit-take-worthy special effects, to send the tale into full-throttle. This is when you appreciate the genius of Donyale Werle's set (Clamp's rinky-dink boat is a scream) as well as the band itself: Keith Frederickson on guitar, Daniel Kutcher on bass, Jesse Wallace on drums and Julie Lake and Steven Boyer on various vocals and puppet voices.

The tempest turns out tragically for a smarmy puppet named Dennis, a shirtless boatswain whose chief feature is a cat o' nine tails latched to his belt, but thankfully an effete crab comes along to enliven the plot. Though Clamp forgoes sailing to serve a higher power, you know Party Island's pull will return him to the sea in the end. Yes, vagina jokes and too many songs make the briny mix even saltier, but *Jollyship* is still a swan dive into dopamine-deprived depravation. I especially loved the cameo for a horny raccoon and a squirrel. Like Jones, it was seriously nuts.