

Reviews of The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade April 20 – 30, 2017

The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade, by Kieron Barry.

Directed by John Sowle.

Reviewed by J. Peter Bergman, Berkshire Bright Focus

"What a whack-job!"

Author Kieron Barry has a dilemma: can he write, honestly, a play about his own life without changing anything, including everyone's names, and still write an honest play? In 2015 Barry had a bad break-up with his girl-friend, a singer named Jade. It left him with a broken heart, a nervous breakdown and a near tragic mid-life crisis. As he puts it in an author's note in the



program, *"One of the many under-recognized benefits of such a grand slam is the end of embarrassment, when they're shaving your chest in the ambulance to apply the paddles you note with distant joy that the largeness of your nose is now irrelevant. There are bigger fish to be gutted now."*

Gutted is exactly what they are in this play about his life turning inside out and leaving him upside down in a world that doesn't see his problems as problems. Kieron (Jason Guy) and Jade (Bonita Jackson in one of over a dozen roles) have existed in a three year long dry relationship. No sex. Just love and devotion. It's a fact that no one wants to believe, including Jade's best friend, Emma (also Jackson). Kieron writes. Jade makes music. Jade wants the career that

Kieron has basically forged but neither of them has hit the top rungs in their fields. So, when after a muscle spasm akin to a seizure Jade walks out, Kieron is both bereft and fit-to-be-tied. He is a man who rants. He is a man who raves. He is a writer whose reality must be filtered through a comedy curtain that splits open every time to show his pain.

Kieron in this play is a character worthy of the great comedy writers of the past century. If the show is indeed autobiographical then Kieron Barry is a man on the verge of greatness for his insights into all of the characters in this play, including Kieron, are deeper than anything achieved by most of the best writers of our time.

John Sowle has achieved another triumphant bi-fecta, directing this world-premiere performance on a set he has also designed. The onstage, inverse-raked platform holds the actors securely and also contains all of the props and furnishings necessary to move the story through one location after another. The play is an almost ninety minute one-act that, unlike most single act plays, has no obvious point where an intermission could have been inserted. Instead the play flies forward all the time and one moment seems to securely lead to the next and the next without breaking momentum. Under Sowle's directorial guidance Bonita Jackson transforms from one human entity to another with barely a second to breathe away one persona

before encompassing a different one. At the same time Jason Guy maintains the center of play, Kieron, without ever flagging even when sheer exhaustion must be waiting to overtake the actor.



The writing demands rhythm in the playing and this trio has found a tempo that would exhume even a Jerome Robbins dancer, and yet the two actors seem to have no problem keeping things at a high trot all of the time. There are a few moments when the play slows down for an emotional shafting, but before a sigh of relaxation can be sighed, the play and its characters are on the run once again

Jason Guy shifts from tragedy to comedy with alacrity. He paints a picture of this man who fluctuates constantly with a very discreet brush. As Kieron is moved toward self-disintegration Guy keeps us on the edge of our seats almost praying that he won't burst into flames from all of the friction he creates and lives within. For a comedy this is a very serious role, a late Neil Simon role, a man on the brink of self-created madness surviving strife through the determination of the damned. It is a tour-de-force performance of a role that seems to have been written just for him to play.

Jade, Emma, a psychiatrist, a doctor, a nurse, a parent, and others harder to comprehend - all are played by Bonita Jackson with lighting changes of accent, hair style, posture, movement and vocal qualities. This is a grand old-time radio performance, in truth, with every character completely discernable through the voice alone. However when you add the amazing physical dynamics she plays with each character it is as though a large company of actors is working the small Bridge Street stage. Hers is a name to remember for after this amount of incredible work you can believe that there are no roles outside her range, nothing is impossible and I want to be certain that I see her whenever I can. She literally and impractically gave 250% in this play.

Sound Designer Carmen Borgia is a great help with his sound design and there are some visual elements that help to keep the play focused, if you can remember what they were when they're mentioned later on. Kieron Barry, the playwright, is clearly a madman but the sort you'd like to have to dinner, as long as his car was standing by to whisk him away once again. This new work is an undiluted triumph and Bridge Street Theatre has a hit on its hands. Hopefully people will discover the play and keep it alive for as long as possible.

The playwright's the thing in *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade*

B.A. Nilsson | Monday, April 24 2017 in The Alt

"This is a triumph of postmodern meta-theater," declares the character Kieron Barry, not to be confused with the playwright Kieron Barry although it's understandable if you do. To which Danielle, his director (within the play, that is; not the director of the play), replies, "Are you sure it's not just a fuck-and-tell?"

Under discussion are, or is, *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade*, the world premiere of which took place at Catskill's Bridge Street Theatre, and which brings back to the area the work of a playwright previously acclaimed for *Tomorrow in the Battle*.

Love relationships were scrutinized in that dark, dramatic piece; here a dark, dramatic break-up becomes the stuff of comedy as Kieron Barry (the character) seeks meaning in the abrupt departure of Jade, his girlfriend of three years, a fate similarly suffered by the playwright.

It sounds confusing. It is. It has to be. There's no keener crisis of rejection in one's life, and I mean knife-edge keen. And there's usually deception involved, as when Kieron self-destructively draws a blade across his forearm, producing stripes of blood – only to be admonished by Danielle that stage blood will emerge more easily if he moves the knife *this* way.

Two actors inhabit the play. Jason Guy is Kieron, bringing a nebbishy goodness to the character even as his more repellant aspects are revealed. Bonita Jackson has a field day as everybody else, quick-changing voice and attitude as she moves from Danielle to best-friend Emma to an Indian physician to priest to therapist and on and on – and ultimately to Jade.

Part of the fun of the piece is the pace at which it moves. It's built into the script, but that doesn't always mean it'll be realized, so all the more credit is due director John Sowle, who also designed the set.

A forced-perspective platform dominates the small stage, and the platform is ringed with bins from which all needed props are fetched. The playing areas are defined with chairs and gestures, with occasional intrusions from a video screen.

Danielle reminds playwright Barry that he'd promised a script about Bill Evans. She's dismayed to see instead a four-and-a-half-hour meditation on Kieron's romantic travails. In that respect, it hearkens to Ross McElwee's 1986 film documentary *Sherman's March*, which turned an attempt at documenting the Civil War event into a search for love. *Kieron and Jade*, however, has no framing device outside of the facts of the facts themselves, putting it more in line with the phenomenon of Reality Television.

Kieron and Jade asks us to sympathize with the former as he puts his very soul on display, yet the shadow of the actual Jade Hendrix hangs over it all as an unwilling (or at least mum) participant. His story is her story, too, and the intrusion includes footage of her in a music video that he directed, scrubbed of the music as he wasn't able to get the rights to it.

We're warned at the start that this is a play about "addiction and delusion," although, in keeping with meta-fiction of the Nabokovian variety, we're kept unsure about who's deluding whom.

What keeps the play rolling along very entertainingly is the succession of friends and authority figures Kieron encounters, all of them Jade-like in some way because even Jackson herself is Jade-like, while Jade herself turns out to have a not-too-surprising progenitor (shades of Humbert!)

Kieron is a prisoner of his grief, and Jackson becomes the booming prison guard who hands him an envelope and orders him to “empty out your subconscious,” with surprising results. The absurdity continues: “We have to figure out what your triggers are,” a doctor insists, telling him to pocket a machine called Arouser 7000, which will sound an audible alarm when he’s sexually excited. And there’s even a touch of *Goon Show* humor, as when Kieron asks how to tell if a physical wound still hurts and is told, “Press down firmly and listen for the word ‘ouch.’”

He travels from priest to therapist and back again; the action segues from rehearsal-room scenes into the play itself; a sock puppet proves to be violently therapeutic; a *deus ex machina* snakes its way in from a plane. You may be puzzled; you won’t be bored.

Kieron’s issues are unthreaded in a most Freudian way, but, thus revealed, they aren’t conventionally resolved. In the end, the wretchedness in which this character wallows eats away at the play’s comic fabric, deliberately and effectively.

“Do you have your Trader Joe’s speech ready?” friend Emma asks early on, and it sets up the scene at the end – we know it’s coming – of a valedictory encounter between the titular two.

The concept of fiction exists as an orderly way of containing a sequence of events, and it allows injections of sentiment and morality that less-linear storytelling resists. Would this tale be as effective if we thought it were fiction only? Hard to tell. It’s a well-crafted script, but it wants us to believe that it’s punishing Kieron as it celebrates his concept of Jade – yet I can’t help thinking that the act of writing it this way is celebrating Kieron even as it punishes poor Jade.

The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade, By Kieron Barry, Directed by John Sowle, Bridge Street Theatre, Catskill, Through April 30

Review by James Yeara in Spotlight News

The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade by Kieron Barry, directed and designed by John Sowle, Bridge Street Theatre; Catskill, NY; through April 30.

The world premiere production of award-winning playwright Kieron Barry's eponymous and pithy comedic psycho-drama is full of theatrical magic. Director John Sowle does double duty again as set designer and does yet again his damndest to dazzle: the simple raked diagonal line downright to midleft stage forces the perspective and functions as both platform for the two actors to tightwalk on and to stuff their baggage into and out of. The large upstage projection screen is also slanted, only from stage left to right. The tilted projected photos and films from Barry's life aid the play on multiple levels. The two counterpointed skewered set pieces make the perfect stage pictures for Barry's *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade*, a two actor, 40 character tour de force on the weirdness of human love.

And it is weird, in that classic Woody Allen *The Purple Rose of Cairo* or *Midnight in Paris* fashion. Bridge Street Theatre challenges its audiences with plays you won't see in more timid theaters in the area, yet the quirkiness of the plays they choose to produce highlight what connects us all. Here it is playwright Barry's *Facebook* narcissism meets English Woody Allen "3 jokes on every page" constantly breaking the Fourth Wall all in the quest for love. The audience is constantly laughing and giggling as Kieron (a game Jason Guy) spins out his dizzying tale of wooing and losing and searching for Jade (a Protean Bonita Jackson who plays "Jade and Everyone Else," and lives up to the billing). Scenes and characters hurtle along in that good improv troupe way, with Guy capturing the nebbish Englishman out of his depth as if Woody Allen had been thrust into a Monty Python satire of *Sunset Boulevard*. Jackson shifts accents, diction, and physicality to play put upon director with a 400 page script that Kieron's lawyer, psychotherapist, and priest all advise against doing.

But "doing" is what *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade* does, and cast, director, designer, and the uncredited projectionist do it well. Any play that starts with the beginning of the Werner Herzog film *Grizzly Man*---"he got what he deserved" the clips ends with, setting up delusional Timothy Treadwell's and Kieron's similar fates---and climaxes with Samuel L. Jackson doing a deus ex machina turn---Jackson's stated diction turning hysterically into Kieronese translation, "What are you malefactors doing here?"---deserves an audience. And while the parts of the play are greater than its sum, the 90 minute/no intermission *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade* pleases with laughter and teases out a well earned final theme: "and all I'm left is a new day, whether I want it or not."

Kieron's Metatheatrical, Autobiographical Adventures



by Barbara Waldinger, Berkshire on Stage

In 2015, according to playwright Kieron Barry, he “at last achieved the long-coveted triple: broken heart, nervous breakdown and midlife crisis.” How would he get through the various stages of grief after the woman he lived with for three years left him? Barry decided to keep a diary, writing down each new thought, which led him to the idea of writing a play about the trauma he suffered, and/or a play about writing a play about his grief. In the course of this World-Premiere of *The Official Adventures of Kieron and Jade*, we learn that the play began as a four hour and forty minute oeuvre, which his unwilling director, having been threatened by Kieron with breach of contract if she did not direct it, was able to whittle down to a ninety-minute intermission-less comedy. It had to be a comedy, says Barry, because who would be interested in the misery he suffered unless the play provoked the laughter of recognition from an audience who had gone through similar breakups? “On paper, this is a play about self-harming, mental illness, even suicide. But as long as I can make a joke out of it, it will work.”

Born in Stratford-upon-Avon and currently residing in Ventura, California, Barry has written several published plays, including *Tomorrow in the Battle* (performed at Stagemworks/Hudson), *Numbers*, featured in Lucy Kerber’s book 100 GREAT PLAYS FOR WOMEN, and *Stockwell*, for which Barry was nominated for a London Evening Standard Theatre Award.



The Official Adventures of Kieron & Jade features two accomplished performers: Jason Guy, a talented, energetic, fast-talking British actor who portrays Kieron, and Bonita Jackson, who creates more than fifteen different characters, according to director John Sowle. Jackson's talent at transforming herself into multiple characters using various accents is a tour-de force, but it is not always easy to tell them apart. The most puzzling aspect of having only two performers, no matter how enjoyable it is to see good actors at the top of their game, is that we expect and look forward to seeing the other title character—the American singer/songwriter Jade—but it rarely happens. This leaves us to wonder whether we missed her among the other characters and if not, why the playwright has chosen to sideline her. We do see Jade in videos and photographs projected onto a lopsided screen upstage—are these projections the real people or the actors? Kudos to John Sowle for his visual imagery and for the amazingly inventive set—a long, triangular-shaped piece that spans the width of the stage, with a steep incline on the top (another skewed angle), along which the actors can sit, stand and lie down. Behind the incline are two small boxes that can be pulled up as seats for the actors, as well as a tennis net, and below the incline is a wall facing us with multiple doors that contain props used during the play.

Carmen Borgia, the sound designer, treats us to a terrific palette of musical interludes, sounds, and songs of various styles between and during the scenes. The play moves rapidly from scene to scene, interspersed with visual and aural stimuli, and even includes an actual recorded therapy session between Barry and his doctor. Sowle informs us that the quick pacing of the play is meant to evoke 1930s screwball comedy. The transitions from scene to scene are efficiently and beautifully choreographed. We are even shown a live action film noir/melodrama, a la *Casablanca*, in which a French woman pleads with her man to stay with her, rather than to enlist in WW II and kill Nazis. It's funny, effective, and sexy, with the woman alternately attracted to the man who dreams of becoming a killer but repelled by him when he accedes to her desire to stay. This message is repeated throughout the play when the various female characters advise Kieron to be strong and fight back because passivity and a “woe is me” attitude are definitely not attractive to women.

The actors bring the audience into the performance by breaking the fourth wall and even involving us in some of the quirky action. We are always aware that these actors are stand-ins for the real people and we try to separate in our minds what is real from what is theatrical. We are told that Kieron is delusional and through his encounters with various professionals who try to help him, we learn about the flaws in his relationship with Jade that he did not, would not, or could not see. Did the playwright see them? What about his alter ego? If the character is the playwright then the play is like a hall of mirrors, each a reflection of the other. Despite the playwright's attempts at humor, the laughs came only intermittently. Perhaps this subject does not lend itself as easily to comedy as Barry hoped.

The play opens with filmed footage of Timothy Treadwell, the main character in the film *GRIZZLY MAN*, showing the love and trust he had for the bears he chose to live with. Just as Treadwell was eaten by one of those bears, so was Barry metaphorically eaten by a woman who, unbeknownst to him, did not love him.

