



Superman 2050 By Theater Un-Speak-Able (Times Square International Theater Festival 2012)

by [Geoffrey Paddy Johnson](#) on January 23, 2012

Deploying a short and narrow raised, wooden platform, with a total area surface of 21 square feet, seven actors in blue spandex outfits (that's 3 square feet each they have to work with; you do the math!), no scenery or lighting effects, and just 35 minutes, [Theater Un-Speak-Able](#) set out to tell that well-worn saga of our age, [Superman](#), transposing it to the year 2050. No actor gets to leave the platform during the telling. All of the fantastical visual effects necessary in the elaboration of this story – illustrated comic book panels, complexly designed camera shots – must be generated solely by the actors as they shuffle, dip, duck, dodge and dive while dramatizing such a highly visual narrative. This is both extreme physical performative stagecraft and compacted theatrical story telling.

Despite an unavoidable aura of farce, the adaptation is purely deadpan in delivery. There's barely a hair out of place as we are introduced to the familiar cast of characters – Clark Kent, Lois Lane, Jimmy Olsen, Perry White, and Lex Luthor. Even Lana Lang gets a look in here. All proceeds in orderly fashion as the villainous genius Luthor schemes to destroy the mid-western high-speed rail network (I know we don't have one now, but in 2050...) and, of course, take out Superman in order to achieve that end. Will his dastardly plan succeed, or will the man of steel save the day? (Oh, come on.) Tropes from the popular [Alexander Salkind](#) movie of 1978 (will we ever get passed this rendition?) – [John Williams'](#) music (dum-de-dum-de-de!), lifted lines of dialogue (“You've *got me? Who's got you?*”) – are sprinkled into the mix to create a narrative shorthand, generate atmosphere, and, cunningly, a sense of nostalgic conspiracy. After all, this piece is fundamentally reliant on the audience's imaginative participation. And this is where and how it scores. Make no mistake, for all the light-weight silliness at play, this is a sophisticated and highly disciplined piece of theater, and its steel is what brings it off. Which really is the ultimate pleasure about [Superman 2050](#); it is a meringue developed by engineers and architects, who just happen to be savvy chefs too.

An ensemble-developed project, it emerges from the Lecoq-styled approach which stresses disciplined physical performance and improvisational story-telling. As director and original conceiver, [Marc Frost](#) must rank as the head chef. A quietly enchanting Clark Kent/Superman, Frost is to be commended also for his direction and for assembling such an extraordinarily winning cast of cartoonishly perfect performers, each of whom seems to resonate with the recalled ghosts of by-gone cameo role greats. As well as characters, actors stand in for scenery and objects, in forms both hackneyed and original, generating illusions, visual and aural, that deftly and economically command attention. There are even some moments of transcendental beauty, such as when Superman is flying with Lois, and the other actors, huddled at their feet, making low whooshing noises, hands sweeping softly to an fro, suggest clouds and the passage of air over the duo. It's simple and startling. No green screens needed here. No super-padded and enhanced costumes either. There's enough firm flesh to ogle that could while away more than twice the tale's duration. Just say no to CGI.

My one small cavil, if I could be allowed, is with the determined G rated feel of the exercise, the refusal to develop subtext or analyze the original tale. The well-worn frame is broken in only one instance, in the character of Jimmy Olsen, who is shown to be more than a little slavishly attached to the company of Clark Kent. At the finale, [Brittany Bookbinder](#), in the role of Jimmy, emits such a hysterical shriek of complex delight when the Daily Planet employees are rejoined by the mysteriously absent-for-everything

Clark, that it opens up all sorts of imaginative new perspectives on the saga. But perhaps I'm asking for too much here from this otherwise masterful, rapid-fire condensing of one of our great modern fairy tales. It's a mistake, after all, to look for the yolk in a meringue. With it, it would simply be something quite other. That it's taken out is frankly the pleasure of it.

A Chicago based outfit, the hard-working cast and crew is rounded out by Kathleen Wrinn, Thomas Kelly, Melissa Cameron, Becky McNamara, Lily Emerson, Zachary Baker-Salmon, and Alice da Cunha. More good works must be anticipated from this imaginative group, who surely are struggling to keep theatre performance alive – for truth, for justice, and the American way.

Superman 2050 was featured as part of the Times Square International Theater Festival at the Roy Arias Studios & Theatres located at 300 W. 43rd St, NY, NY.

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***Superman 2050***

*A Theater Un-Speak-Able Production*

*Writer and designer: The Ensemble, Theater-Un-Speak-Able Director: Marc Frost*

*Roy Arias Theatre Center*