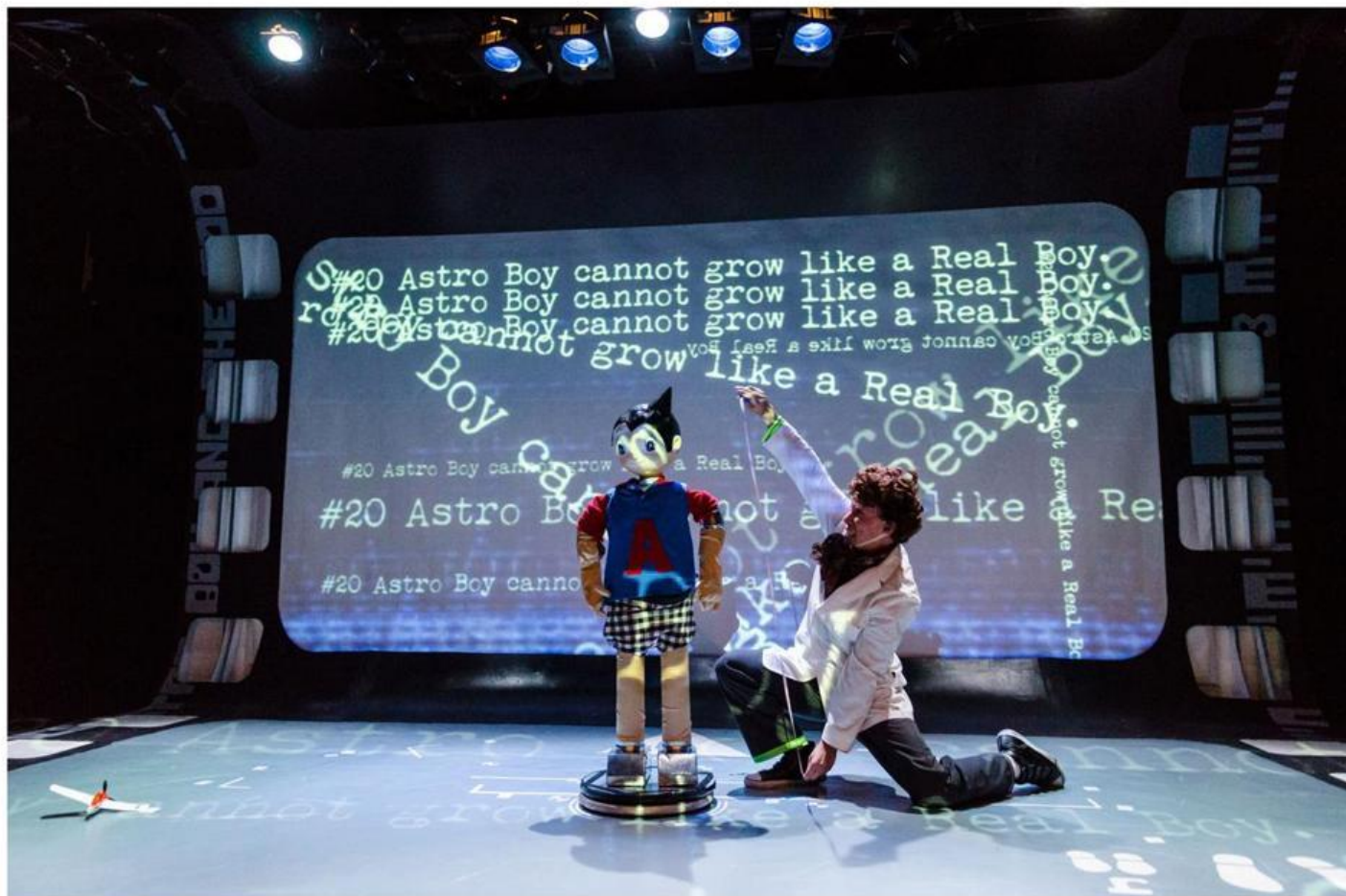


STAGE REVIEW

Company One's 'Astro Boy' a sci-fi parable with punch

By [Don Aucoin](#)

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Company One in "Astro Boy & The God of Comics" by Natsu Onoda Power © 2014 LIZA VOLL

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Clark Young plays Japanese manga pioneer Osamu Tezuka, the inspiration for Natsu Onoda Power's "Astro Boy and the God of Comics."

Summer doldrums? What summer doldrums? Not at Company One Theatre, where Natsu Onoda Power delivers a shot of adrenaline to the season in the New England premiere of "Astro Boy and the God of Comics."

Alternately whimsical and dead-serious, cheesy and profound, "Astro Boy" is inspired by the life and work of cartoonist Osamu Tezuka, a pioneer in the Japanese comic-book style known as manga. Tezuka's 1950s series about a robotic action hero named Astro Boy who battled the forces of evil became so popular it was turned into an animated TV show in the 1960s.

Drawing from those raw materials, Power deploys imaginative theatrical language to fashion what could be seen as a nuclear-age allegory about technology, presented here as a door that opens to the future, as a profitable commodity, as a savior, and as a destroyer. Directing a spirited eight-member ensemble at Company One Theatre, Power unleashes an 80-minute torrent of live action, animation,

puppetry, video projections, ear-catching sound effects, and amazingly fast drawings with charcoal pencils and Sharpies by cast members.

Cartoon fantasy vies with reality for the upper hand in the scenario devised by Power, which consists of a dozen “episodes” that unfold in reverse chronological order, beginning with the death of Astro Boy in the present day and concluding with the birth of Tezuka in 1928.

As the play opens, humans are fleeing for space colonies because environmental radiation has poisoned planet Earth. When it turns out that the sun is the source of that radiation, scientists invent a device that harnesses the energy of nuclear explosions; if transported to the sun, the gizmo will somehow “counteract the irregular activities on the sun’s surface” and “restore the sun’s fusion activity to normal,” a scientist explains to a TV reporter. Um, OK.

But who would be noble and selfless enough to sacrifice his life by ferrying the nuclear device to the sun? Astro Boy, that’s who. As played by Gianella Flores, Astro Boy is a winsome figure who only wants to help humans and is attired in red boots, a jet pack and a clock on her back, and cone-like tufts of “hair.”

In one of several amusingly low-tech touches in the production, an actress simulates the humanity-saving flight into the sun by carrying a small puppet of Astro Boy aloft on a stick and running around the stage, like a kid with a toy. Later, in a sequence that unspools in the herky-jerky rhythms of an experimental animation film Tezuka once attempted, we see the cartoonist frantically racing to meet a deadline as he creates Astro Boy.

The cast Power has chosen for the Company One Theatre production includes her longtime collaborator Clark Young as the moody, work-obsessed Tezuka, wearing the cartoonist’s trademark beret. (Young also played Tezuka in the premiere of “Astro Boy” in Washington two years ago, a production directed by Power.) Other members of the ensemble, all of whom enter fully into the spirit of the enterprise, include Jeff Song, Jessica Chance, Phil Berman, Amanda Ruggiero, Robert St. Laurence, and Kaitee Tredway.

Astro Boy may possess strength equal to 100,000 horsepower of energy, an IQ of 300, and the ability to speak 60 languages fluently, but he has feelings, too. We learn that when he weeps. There’s a Pinocchio-like poignancy to this lifelike boy; he sees human cruelty firsthand.

Indeed, for all its larky trappings, there’s a dark undercurrent to “Astro Boy.” In one sequence, Power delivers a pointed commentary on rampant ethnic stereotyping. Woven throughout the latter part of the play are reminders of the psychological impact on Tezuka of the bombings of Osaka by US forces in World War II, which he witnessed, and of the even wider devastation Japan suffered when atomic bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

That combination of utter seriousness and playfulness is a specialty of Company One Theatre, which continues to punch above its weight as it concludes its 15th season. Under the shrewd leadership of artistic director Shawn LaCount, the troupe takes advantage of the relatively quiet summer months, when the big theater companies in Boston scale back their activities. Two years ago LaCount directed an electrifying production of Kristoffer Diaz’s “The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Deity,” set in the world of pro wrestling. Last summer brought Idris Goodwin’s captivating hip-hop play “How We Got On,” helmed by Company One Theatre mainstay Summer L. Williams.

Now we have “Astro Boy and the God of Comics,” which is part sci-fi parable and part cockeyed valentine to creativity — a value that this multimedia treat itself embodies.

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