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## PULSE

# THEATER FREAKS

Off-Broadway acts go loony tune-y

BY LARRY GETLEN

This week, you can see a musical about a young girl who's portrayed by a 55-year-old woman, featuring music played on a piano with screws, pencil erasers, paper clips, playing cards and a pipe cleaner attached to its strings. Or, you can see a show that depicts President Andrew Jackson as an angst-ridden teen who cuts himself.

If you're a fan of quirky, out-of-the-box musicals, this is your week.

Tuesday sees the opening of the Public Theater's "Bloody Bloody Andrew Jackson," an emo musical about our first populist president whose creators compare it to "South Park." Then on Thursday comes the MCC Theater's first performance of the musical "Coraline," an adaptation of the popular Neil Gaiman book with music by the Magnetic Fields' Stephin Merritt.

"Bloody" was written and directed by Alex Timbers, who along with songwriter Michael Friedman realized Jackson was "the ultimate emo president."

"He was a highly emotional figure, almost to a hyperbolic, comedic extent. And he was a cutter. He and his wife would cut themselves."

With teen-angst rave-ups, such as "Life Sucks"—in which our hero declares, "I'm Andrew F---in' Jackson!" the show takes a "Schoolhouse Rock" approach to Jackson's life, while positioning him as the ultimate protagonist for a 1980s teen comedy.

"This man was so angry at the people who did him wrong: Washington aristocrats, Indians, Spaniards, the British," says Timbers. "He's the outsider in high school beat up by the jocks, who put that energy into becoming incredibly successful. He was that put-down loser we can all identify with."

"Coraline," which concerns a little girl who finds a door to a dark and mysterious parallel world, is considerably spookier, leading Merritt to compose for three types of piano.

"The mood at the beginning is one of boring domesticity," he says, "so what better to represent that than good old piano. But as she goes into another world, we switch to the prepared piano."

Prepared piano has objects such as screws, pencil erasers and paper clips attached to its strings, creating what Merritt calls "an 88-piece percussion orchestra." Then Coraline herself is accompanied by a toy piano, lending another bizarre level to the sight of 55-year-old Jayne Houdyshell playing the young protagonist.

"That's what makes it theater. You get to make unexpected choices," says director Leigh Silverman.

Ultimately, both shows hope to provide an experience unlike anything else.

"It's this little, beautiful off-Broadway event," says Merritt. "I hope people walk out saying, 'What the hell was that? I have never seen anything even remotely like that. Let's go to another one.'"