



### **To the HAA Grant Panel:**

Included in this PDF packet are reviews about the shows as produced in 2012 (collected by Gideon Productions on their website), along with several full reviews of the 2015 “binge-worthy” performance following. Enjoy!

### **ADVANCE MAN by Mac Rogers, directed by Jordana Williams (2012)**

“The highly promising start to a sci-fi trilogy...the funny, compelling script and the full commitment of the cast leave the audience wanting to learn how this saga plays out.” Flavorpill — Editor Pick

“...thrives in its persuasive entangling of science fiction with straightforward domestic drama... And while this interstellar enigma carries the play briskly toward its celestial conclusion, it is the surprising tenderness and humor... that keeps the action absorbing.” [Backstage](#) — Critic’s Pick

“...the side plots are unique, the suspense is high, and Mac Rogers’s writing is so engaging that the audience finds itself fully invested in the unfolding mystery... Anyone who sees this piece, with its high energy and solid acting and production value, will be sure to line up for the next two installments.” -Show Business Weekly

“Advance Man is fast paced and the dialogue crackles... there is rarely a dull moment. Belly laughter erupted from the audience at all the right times (and none of the wrong times). Beyond mere technical proficiency or pure entertainment, however, Advance Man also provides food for thought.” [-Cultural Capitol](#)

“If you want to make an argument for bringing science fiction to live theater, look no further than Mac Rogers’ Advance Man... Rogers has a knack for highlighting the kind of modern stories that you don’t often see in theater, but that are just as universal as the themes explored by classic playwrights.” [-Tor.com](#)

“...the play is fascinating, suspenseful, and gripping, and will be of especial interest to fans of the science fiction genre...The entire cast is excellent across the board... I am highly anticipating the next two installments.” [-Broadway World](#)

“Rogers’ writing is daring...Jordana Williams’ direction is nothing short of fantastic. I was with this play every moment. And I eagerly wait what happens next in part two.” [-NYTheatre.com](#)

### **BLAST RADIUS by Mac Rogers, directed by Jordana Williams (2012)**

“Crackling exchanges are at the core of Blast Radius, whose confident writing displays deep affection for the genre... two hours zip by. It’s a credit to the propulsive plotting that amid debates about dissent, love and honesty, the question “Blast Radius” most frequently prompts is simply: What happens next?” - [NY Times](#) — Critic’s Pick

“Space philosophy comes closest to describing this entertaining work. And yet there’s no point trying to box in a work that comes from an author so clearly thinking outside of the box.” -[New York Press](#)

“Mac Rogers’ sci-fi epic Honeycomb Trilogy is shaping up to be one of the most original, complex, and compelling theatrical works of the year.” -Flavorpill — Editor Pick

“If you like theatre, and especially if you like science fiction, and especially if you like both, GO GO GO... Even though it’s about aliens, it’s an enormously human play.” -[BroadwayWorld](#)

“Blast Radius is a complex and engrossing show...The audience will find itself scrambling to stay one step ahead of the action. All that is ugly, desperate, hopeful, and fiercely loving in humanity is on display.” -Show Business Weekly

“...demonstrates that the stage is also a perfect medium on which to tell our old/new stories of oppression, destruction, and defiant resilience, and could teach Hollywood a thing or two about how to do it right.” -[io9](#)

“Not a scene feels superfluous or out of place, and the action skips along, keeping the audience on the edge of its seat for over two hours... It’s a more intense, satisfying experience than you can get on your couch or in a movie theater.” -[Cultural Capitol](#)

“...because Blast Radius is good sci-fi, it’s good theater. Rogers and company have hit upon a way of making the usually spectacle-driven genre work excellently onstage.” -[New York Theatre Review](#)

### **SOVEREIGN by Mac Rogers, directed by Jordana Williams (2012)**

”As in ‘Blast Radius,’ Mr. Rogers displays an impressive control over his sprawling material, creating a convincing postapocalyptic world inside a sturdy theatrical structure...‘Sovereign’ has a driving pace and a sneaky theatrical intelligence.” -[New York Times](#) — Critics’ Pick

“The crackling alien-takeover drama can operate independently of its former installments. In fact, winding blind through the narrative maze...creates the sensation of gradually unfolding truth, of hearing a story at the edge of great complexity. As for those who saw sections one and two, I’m assuming you were there at the Secret Theatre ahead of me. Who could stay away? In Cheek’s long series of downtown triumphs...I can not remember ever seeing her in such full, exultant stride.” - [Time Out NY](#) — Critics’ Pick

“One of the most intelligent and complex theatrical events of the year.” Flavorpill — Editor Pick

”...a play every bit as rich and daring as the previous two... ably completing the long and stirring transmutation through which Rogers has taken these characters-from small domestic anxieties to far-reaching debates about mankind’s survival in the face of oppression and moral decay.” -[Backstage](#) — Critic’s Pick

“This is science fiction, but first and foremost, it’s effective drama...I feel honored to have borne witness to this magnificent series in its entirety. Go.” -[Broadwayworld.com](http://Broadwayworld.com)

“This is definitely the theater of Big Ideas. The only place one can find a similar level of innovation and profundity these days is on cable dramas like The Wire or The Sopranos. Sci-fi in Mr. Rogers’s hands invigorates the stage and elevates it to where it used to be: the place where we go to learn about ourselves and experience catharsis in the company of others.” -[Cultural Capitol](http://CulturalCapitol)

“Gideon Productions has certainly set high stakes for serialized theater with these three shows, and is definitely a group to keep on your radar.” -Show Business Weekly

“...an intimate, emotional work, bridging the head and the heart without ever resorting to pathos or unearned sentiment. The emotional material here is so deft that it pushes for real estate on a par with Shakespeare, Ibsen and O’Neill... So make the time to catch this show – you’ll regret it if you don’t.” -[New York Press](http://NewYorkPress)

“The accomplishment of the world Rogers and Gideon have built is the entirety of the world and the characters they created throughout the three plays: all of the nuance, all of the humanity.” -[NYTheatre.com](http://NYTheatre.com)

# Review: In 'The Honeycomb Trilogy,' a Family Confronts Invading Apian Overlords

**Mac Rogers' The Honeycomb Trilogy**

NYT Critic's Pick

Off Broadway, Play

Closing Date: Nov. 14, 2015

Gym at Judson, 243 Thompson St.

**By Alexis Soloski**

Oct. 22, 2015

A series of plays to make you start at the buzz of a cellphone or look askance at a beeswax candle, Mac Rogers's "The Honeycomb Trilogy," an exhilarating D.I.Y. saga at the Gym at Judson, imagines an Earth subjugated by an apian race. Over the course of these ambitious dramas, which you can and should see in a marathon showing, a Florida family introduces, abets and opposes these insectoid overlords, the People of the Honeycomb.

Early on, the teenage Ronnie looks witheringly at her father and her brother, Abbie. "You guys are like what ever's beyond nerds," she says. That probably describes Mr. Rogers, too. A lot of comic books, midnight movies, Joss Whedon shows and "Doctor Who" episodes have inspired the unapologetic science fiction of "The Honeycomb Trilogy." Which is not to say that Mr. Rogers's fanboy voice is simplistic or especially derivative. His vision of human relationships (and maybe nonhuman ones) is nuanced, and there's a probing moral consciousness underlying the geeky whiz-bang.

If Mr. Rogers's influences are largely televisual and cinematic, his orientation is clearly theatrical. Without too much awkwardness, he has written all three plays for a single locale, the living room of the Cooke family home. This limited square footage doesn't much cramp his imagination, which is keen, or his aspirations, which are appealingly vast, encompassing space travel, ecoterrorism and interspecies diplomacy. That's saying a lot for plays set around an overstuffed sofa. To spend a day in this setting, which the director, Jordana Williams, and her designers realize with a lot of verve and little cash, is to commit, helplessly and happily, to Mr. Rogers's ingenious neighborhood.

"Advance Man," the only one I had previously seen, is perhaps the weakest of the plays, heavy on exposition and indeterminate in tone. It opens two years after the astronaut Bill Cooke (Sean Williams) and most of his team returned from the first manned mission to Mars. Upon re-entry, they gave up sailing the stars to squelch through the swamps, founding an initiative that hopes to feed the world with marsh-grown veggies. But this boggy farming may be a cover for more suspect endeavors. Conor Wells (Jason Howard), a fellow astronaut who has supposedly suffered a stroke, has things to hide, too.

It would be unsporting to describe "Blast Radius," set 12 years later, and "Sovereign," set eight years after that, in any detail — science fiction is a genre sensitive to spoilers. Suffice it to say that they focus on the struggle between aliens and humans via the younger members of the Cooke family, the resistance fighter Ronnie (first played by Becky Byers, then by Hanna Cheek, both persuasive) and the collaborator Abbie (David Rosenblatt, then Stephen Heskett).

Abbie, who was a shy and awkward teenager, approves of the uniformity of the People of the Honeycomb. He intones their motto: "Share. Nothing is mine. A thing passed into my hands. Take it. May it make you as happy as it made me." Ronnie, a born rebel, doesn't buy Abbie's vision, especially when it involves enslaving the human race.

In these later plays, the plotting is tidier, the conflicts sharper and the emotional force much greater. A wedding scene had the audience in floods of tears, men and women alike, and you could hear sniffing throughout the final minutes of "Sovereign."

Ms. Williams sometimes has difficulty with Mr. Rogers's cliffhanger endings, but she grounds the fantastical events with clarity and palpably enjoys the challenge of achieving a big impact on a small budget. Her cast is enormous by downtown standards, 27 actors in total, many of whom do fine work.

But even with this abundant corps, there are some characters we never see. The People of the Honeycomb don't appear, except for one giant arthropod leg and some offstage droning and shrieking. Mr. Rogers, cleverly and expediently, leaves it up to us to picture this particular menace. He knows that our own humming, stinging fears are more terrifying than anything he and his designers could conjure.



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## FEATURES

# Binge-Watching Sci-Fi Theater is the Future: The Honeycomb Trilogy

Binge-watching is just not for TV. We explore the benefits of the phenomenon in the sci-fi theater world with The Honeycomb Trilogy.

By [Natalie Zutter](#)

October 30, 2015 |

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In 2012, Gideon Productions' science fiction play triptych *The Honeycomb Trilogy* was slightly ahead of its time: you didn't see much "geek theater" aside from a handful of Off-Off-Broadway productions; on Broadway, *Spider-Man: Turn Off the Dark* was giving the fledgling subgenre a bad rap. Independent Gideon, meanwhile, staged three plays in six months, each installment getting a six-week run before moving on to the next one. It was an intense run that drew in old fans and created new ones. But plenty of people who came late to the party felt they missed out.

Yet just a few years later, the field has changed. Genre is very much in the mainstream thanks to Marvel and DC's respective cinematic universes; we're a bit more open to remakes and remounts (a good side effect of the Spider-Man franchise); and, most importantly, we binge-watch a staggering number of formerly serialized stories. Oh, and we know a hell of a lot more about Mars—that part is key. It's a measure of Gideon's savvy that they've decided to reframe this alien invasion story within our current entertainment context as a completely immersive, delightfully geeky (while simultaneously feels-inducing) all-day play marathon.

Now, you don't *have* to take all three plays in at once. After all, Gideon is impressively staging *Advance Man*, *Blast Radius*, and *Sovereign* in rotation three nights a week, with many members of the massive ensemble juggling two different plays a week. You can spread out the experience if you so choose. But one of the most unique and engaging aspects of this remount is how you can also spend eight-and-a-half hours—and 20 years—in the mind of brilliant playwright Mac Rogers.

*The Honeycomb Trilogy* is an alien invasion saga on an epic scale, but it's also a family drama. Its two main players, sister Ronnie and brother Abbie, live out the sins of their father, an astronaut with a radical plan to change the world. Instead, the arrival of a new, insectoid alien race strips humankind of their technology, surnames, civilization, and identity.

Over the course of 20 years, we witness the human race rebuild itself—first as virtual slaves to their alien overlords, struggling to accept a world where everyone is a farmer, and then later as an awkwardly self-governing society that fumbles to rebuild its laws and social mores from long-unused collective memory. Yet, like the best kind of speculative fiction, the major, world-changing decisions are wrought from personal vendettas and selfish choices. Even before familial structures are dismantled, Abbie and Ronnie stand on polarizing ideological sides of the invasion, their opposition becoming the stuff of legend, and then of history.

*Advance Man*, the first of the three plays, starts not even five minutes into the future: two years after his return from Mars, astronaut Bill Cooke (Sean Williams, also one of Gideon's main producers) is ever-so-slightly distant from his family, having given up space exploration in favor of growing organic food all over our home planet. Bill's distractions make his wife Amelia (the superb Kristen Vaughn) suspect him of having an affair, a laughable suspicion once the play's much higher stakes are established. But wherever Bill might have failed with his wife, he's intensely aware of his children, the sensitive Abbie (David Rosenblatt) and his fiercely protective sister Ronnie (Becky Byers).

The third “child” of the family is Conor, another former astronaut who suffered a debilitating stroke on Mars, and is slowly relearning language and movement thanks to Amelia’s focused care and Bill’s patience. More so than any other forward-thinking father, Bill wants to prepare his kids for a particular future without disclosing exactly what that future looks like.

Early in *Advance Man*, Amelia wearily describes her children, her pride and joy, to a private investigator: “Abbie’s like his father. He’s brilliant and he feels everything in the world. Ronnie’s like her father. She’s so angry, and she never backs down.” For all its broad scope, *The Honeycomb Trilogy* is grounded by the constantly-shifting relationship between a brother and sister, from victim and protector to comrades, to ideological opponents, to outright enemies.

*Blast Radius*, the very Shakespearean middle installment of the trilogy, takes place 12-years-later and it’s dystopian all the way. The invasion of giant insectoid aliens, and the subsequent loss of technology and modern civilization, has forced a return to primitive tools and ways of living. There’s now futuristic slang and a breakdown of traditional relationship bonds, as well as constant talk of “the time before.” And did I mention that it takes place in the exact same set of *Advance Man*?

Here’s where some of the natural theater constraints establish the boundaries of this trilogy. Gideon’s venue, The Gym at Judson, doesn’t have a turntable set or the kind of backdrop that can be broken up and rebuilt with ease like on Broadway. All three plays take place in the Cookes’ Florida living room—it just goes through a lot of changes. While a movie would be tempted to (and right to) take advantage of various locations, the best theater chooses a single setting. Director Jordana Williams and technical director/props master Sandra Yaklin transform a typical suburban living room into a safe haven for pregnant women, then into a governor’s residence/makeshift courthouse... and then they put it all back together for the next show. See for yourself.

I don’t want to give away too much of *Blast Radius* or *Sovereign* (the final installment set eight years later), because each sequel is directly linked to the consequences and fallout of its predecessor’s plot. Suffice to say, Abbie and Ronnie choose their sides early on—he finding more connection with the hive-mind Honeycomb, and she fighting for every human who was as helpless as her younger brother once was—and constantly come up against one another in their efforts to rebuild their world.

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It's the kind of sci-fi that eschews big budget production values to focus on how an alien invasion affects ordinary people, who are in turn forced to become major players. And really, that's the most valuable part of a speculative story—not a planetwide loss of resources, but how people *react* to losing medicine, paper, and even glass bottles under layers of mud.

That doesn't mean that Rogers loses sight of his grand scale: we never forget about the lurking presence of the bugs. They're there, screeching and scratching just beyond the borders of the set; interestingly, almost every time the characters face the bugs, it's looking through the fourth wall. The most we ever see is a leg, but it is one hell of a leg.

The emotions that these plays elicit are similarly both micro and macro. I was far from the only person heaving and sobbing at the two huge, important, yet awfully simple gestures that marked the end of *Blast Radius*. And the laughter! It peppered every play, nearly every scene. From teenage Ronnie and Abbie joking about finger-blasting to little moments of levity in even the darkest of dystopian futures, we are constantly reminded of humans' ability to harness humor (intentionally and not) as a coping mechanism.

I can't even pretend to be impartial about these plays. I first reviewed them over six months in 2012. It was a time of emotional and professional turmoil, as I had broken up with my first love and was suffering at a job that would similarly cut me loose just a few months after *Sovereign* ended. On that level alone, watching *The Honeycomb Trilogy* was a kind of therapy. I also drew inspiration from these plays, these frontrunners of a now fairly flourishing subgenre of theater. Indeed, a year or so after the trilogy concluded, I had reviewed shows about superheroes and malevolent AI, and produced my own plays about sex robots and caped crusaders.

In short, I'm very emotionally attached to this trilogy in the bittersweet way of someone who got to experience too-fleeting brilliance. My friends listened patiently but with increasing impatience as I described this incredible experience that they would never have the chance to see. Then came the Honeycomb marathons.

Binge-watching *The Honeycomb Trilogy* as I did last weekend, falls somewhere on the spectrum between bingeing Marvel's *Daredevil* and watching the entirety of *Black Mirror* (which you really shouldn't). Consider the end of *Blast Radius* to hit around *Daredevil*'s eighth episode, where you're about as emotionally battered as Matt Murdock is physically; but thankfully, completing *Sovereign* isn't quite as soul-destroying as taking in all of Charlie Brooker's depressing visions of the future at once.

Rogers and Williams worked together to revamp each play, making the pieces work just as well as standalones as parts of a trilogy. While there were few radical revisions to the script, I noticed adjustments in a key scene between Ronnie and Abbie, and the amping up of certain motifs.

One character who got more play this time around was "The Bald Woman." What starts out as one of Abbie's creepy old drawings becomes an almost archetypal monster, the kind of universal horror of illness and mortality that existed before humans knew to fear giant bugs. I remembered only two mentions of The Bald Woman in the original trilogy—once in *Advance Man* and once in *Sovereign*—but here she gets at least two mentions *per play*.

While in some places the references almost seem like overkill, I realized that this is actually one of the trilogy's running jokes: Abbie asking, "Do you remember The Bald Woman?" and Ronnie stiffening up and unconvincingly responding, "Nooooo..." Even as a war hero, 20 years on, she's suddenly vulnerable again. It humanizes her a lot more than I recall from the 2012 run.

Major kudos also goes to Byers and Rosenblatt for carrying the core of their characters through nonchalant teenagers to hardened twenty-something survivors. Equal consideration also goes to Hanna Cheek and Stephen Heskett, who pick up the characters in *Sovereign*, each bringing their own layer to their respective portrayals: Cheek enhances Ronnie's nonverbal tics, burying the kinds of outbursts that Byers made physical into barely-concealed rage simmering under the clenching and unclenching of fists, and the limitations of a war injury to her leg; whereas Heskett transforms Rosenblatt's almost pathetic yearning need to feel like part of a whole into a steely, heavily-borne exile.

Neither Abbie nor Ronnie are blameless, yet the actors balance the audience's moments of revulsion with reluctant sympathy. Again, I credit binge-watching the trilogy for best crystallizing many of Rogers' themes. As one review points out, an early scene laying out Ronnie and Abbie's worldviews forecasts which sides they take when the bugs hatch. Sexuality also plays a major theme in the trilogy, in a way that's prominent but never lurid or explicit. Ronnie would be called promiscuous, but her sexuality is the best example I've seen of a double-edged sword—a key method of convincing people to follow her orders, but also the only time she doesn't have to think or act.

While Abbie's parents worry in *Advance Man* about him being bullied for being gay, he is the most sexually adventurous character in the trilogy, falling in love with men and women alike, humans or aliens looking out of human eyes. It's the very definition of pansexual. In a present in which sex positivity is being increasingly celebrated and sexual orientation is being increasingly redefined, Abbie and Ronnie put human faces on both issues.

It would be a disservice not to mention the many other people we encounter in the post-invasion world. Many get only one or two scenes to make an impact, but stick with you: Clem (Alisha Spielmann), a brilliant mind dulled by the loss of modern civilization, who loves her deadbeat but earnest partner Dev (Seth Shelden) "anyway," because what other option is there; Fee (Felicia J. Hudson and, later, Yeauxlanda Kay), who, like Amelia before her, redefines the meaning of motherhood; Zander (Matt Golden) and Tanya (Lori E. Parquet), self-taught lawyers constantly pitting a new set of laws against the realities of what humans' values have transformed into.

And Conor! Jason Howard has one of the most difficult jobs of the entire ensemble, playing Conor first as a mental shut-in, battering at the walls of his own mind... and then as someone entirely different, a merging of Honeycomb and human minds, a sappy devotee of forbidden romance novels, and one of the most human characters in the entire trilogy.

Also, of course, there's the Cookes. Even though I haven't touched upon Bill and Amelia since the beginning of this piece, they've still been there the entire time—just like in the marathon, as their influences leave aftereffects on the plays after *Advance Man*.

In a trilogy whose characters include ambassadors and governors, there is a special touch to having a character who seems to be "nothing" more than just a homemaker—Kristen Vaughn plays Amelia's frustration at her kids acting out coupled with what she perceives as her ambition snuffed out, only to find a reason to fan that flame. And as Bill, the man who creates the switch that will change the face of the Earth and the course of the human race, Sean Williams is mesmerizing to watch: shifting cannily between attentive father (but always with an odd edge) and calculating manipulator.

I keep coming back to this fictional family because above all, *The Honeycomb Trilogy* is about giving way to new life, whether that's coaxing someone out of a figurative prison, coaxing bugs out of eggs, or coaxing a broken society into a new form.

Another reason I recommend seeing this trilogy in one day is the camaraderie that binge-watching

creates. In an interview with *Chicago Magazine*, writer-director Sean Graney, who staged all 32 ancient Greek plays in a 12-hour-performance, sums it up perfectly: “By the end of the day, you’ve watched stories with them, you’ve shared food with them, you got sprayed with blood with them—you’ve made a community for one day.” Replace the blood-spraying with ugly-crying, and you get the same result.

Like binge-watching television, binge-watching theater is the kind of experience that unites all age groups. In the break between *Advance Man* and *Blast Radius*, I listened in as a kid (who probably learned several new words like “finger-blasting” and several f-bombs) put aside his smartphone to talk to his grandparents over his predictions for what the aliens would do to Earth. After *Blast Radius*, I ate dinner with a guy my age and his grandfather, during which we dismantled themes of identity and alien “others” and body dysmorphia.

Something that binge-watching took away from traditional television viewing was the water cooler discussion: If you were marathoning a series by yourself or with a friend/significant other, you put yourself on a different timeline than other friends or coworkers, and lose out on the chance to discuss each episode on its own. But what I hope to see with binge-watching theater is the best of both worlds: intense discussions in-between shows with other audience members, as you all immerse yourselves in the world to the same degree.

An experience this immersive is also unique each time it happens. If you’ve gone to the three-hour, site-specific *Sleep No More* or the aforementioned Greek epic marathon *All Our Tragic*, you’ll have a different experience from another audience. So, while you’re watching hours and hours of theater, it’s still intensely personal and unlike any other theatrical moment.

In theater, they ask, “Why is tonight important?” Similarly, *The Honeycomb Trilogy* invites you to discover why spending a full day with this cast and crew is so vital.

*The Honeycomb Trilogy* runs through Nov. 14 at The Gym at Judson in New York City. You can catch *Advance Man* Tuesdays at 8 p.m., *Blast Radius* Thursdays at 8 p.m., and *Sovereign* Fridays at 8 p.m. Or you can marathon all three shows on Saturdays and Sundays at 2 p.m., 5 p.m., and 8:30 p.m. (No performance on Saturday, Oct. 31.) Find out more at Gideon Productions’ website.

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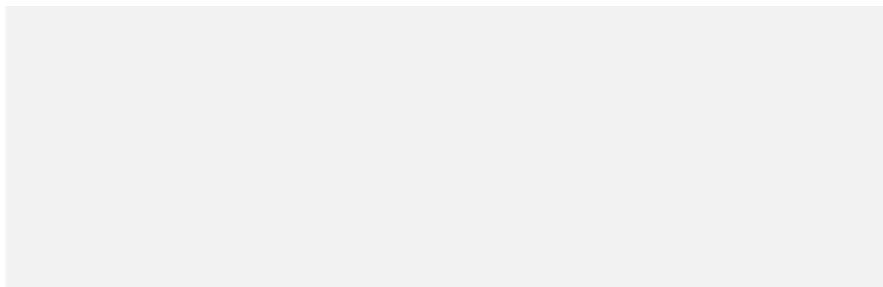
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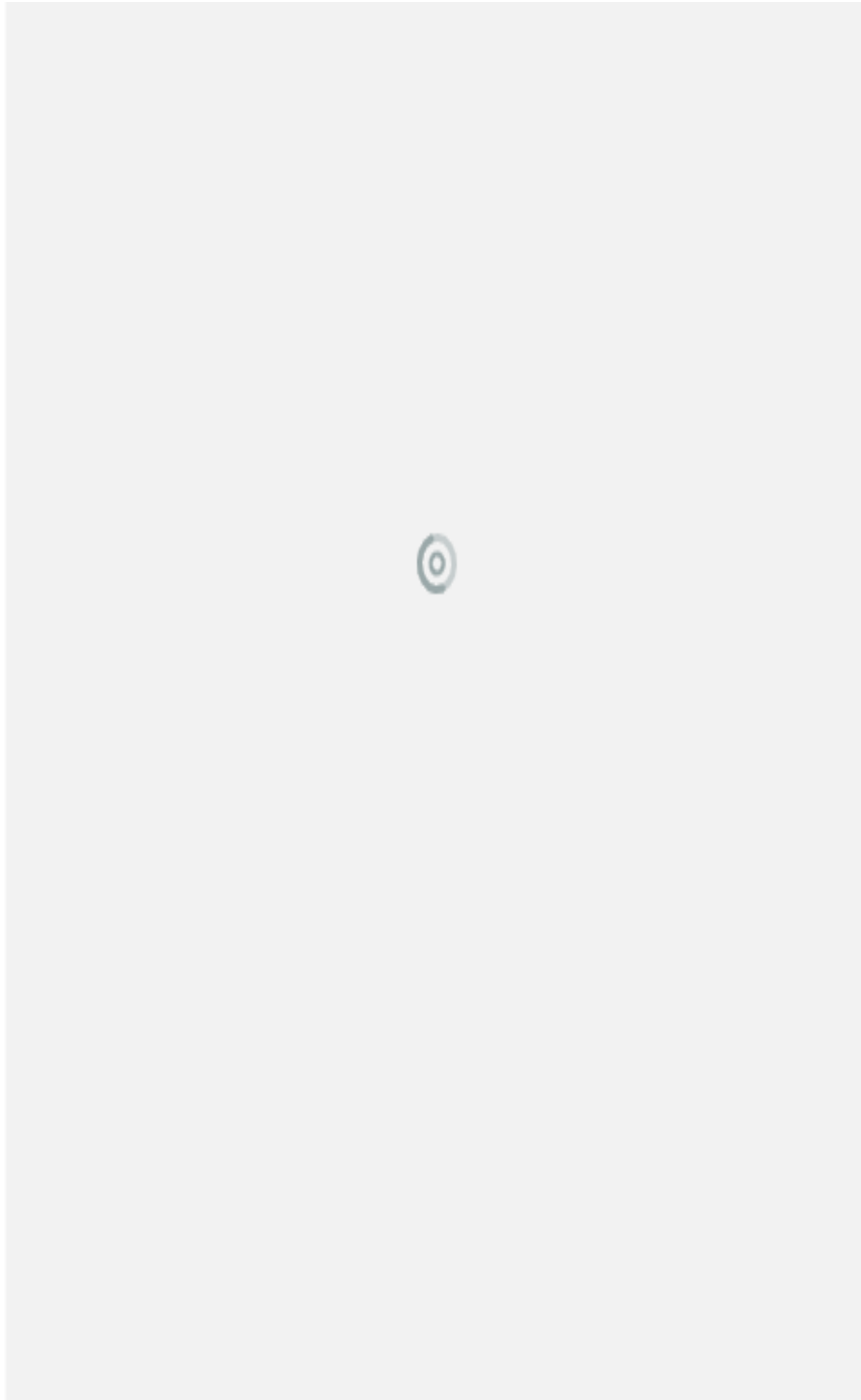
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October 23, 2015

Theater Review (<https://stagebuddy.com/category/theater/theater-review>)

## Review: The Honeycomb Trilogy



(<https://stagebuddy.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Sovereign-featuring-Hanna-Cheek-and-Stephen-Heskett-Photo-credit-Deborah-Alexander.jpg>)

'Sovereign' featuring Hanna Cheek and Stephen Heskett. Credit: Deborah Alexander

One can imagine Mac Rogers sitting at home one day, looking around at the room where he was and wondering what would become of it when he was no longer around. Would it be still standing one hundred years from now? Would its next inhabitants use it for the same purpose he did? Would it be harboring humans even? Wherever his imagination took him, must have been what drove him to write *The Honeycomb Trilogy*, a truly epic work of science fiction that takes place in a single room and spans two decades, includes one alien invasion, and features one of the most harrowing accounts of sibling rivalries since Biblical times.

If Mr. Rogers' source of inspiration was indeed a different one, it's testament to the quality of the plays, that they allow audience members to travel with it, they're the kind of plays that invite people to think and wonder, rather than just concentrating on "telling a story", they're the kind of plays that understand that great theatre works as a mirror that will reflect back something different to each of the people sitting in the dark, each of them an "alien" being welcomed into the world of the plays. Because Mr. Rogers writes science fiction, it happens to be that this particular world has been invaded by cockroach-like aliens who arrived to Earth invited by an idealistic astronaut Bill (Sean Williams) who made their arrangements for their arrival in the first play, *Advance Man*.

Rogers treats this first installment like a domestic drama which sees Bill's obsession with his work tear his family apart. His wife Amelia (an exemplary Kristen Vaughan) believes he is cheating on her, his son Abbie (David Rosenblatt) is dealing with high school bullies, his daughter Ronnie (Becky Byers) is rebelling by staying out beyond her curfew and flirting with her parents' friends, and Bill has decided to become caretaker to his colleague Conor (Jason Howard) who had a stroke on their last mission. In *Blast Radius*, the second chapter, set 12 years after *Advance Man*, Bill is long gone and Ronnie and Abbie have become enemies. He embraces the plans the aliens of the honeycomb have for the human race, while she wants to exterminate them and reclaim her planet.

While science fiction has been used across the decades to serve as a reflection of society's fears and hopes - and have no doubt that *The Honeycomb Trilogy* addresses sociopolitical issues such as eco-terrorism, migration reform, education and same sex unions in smarter ways than anything else produced over the last decade - Rogers never loses the main focus of the trilogy which is the Steinbeck-ian quality of the siblings' tug-of-war. By the time we arrive to the last chapter called *Sovereign*, Abbie and Ronnie are played by different actors, Stephen Heskett and a formidable Hanna Cheek respectively, but their soul remains unchanged; whether they like it or not, and even if they've fought over different political beliefs, they realize they are still the same children who used to fight over nothings during dinner time.

*The Honeycomb Trilogy* is an admirable achievement in terms of production (the imaginative set design and the impressive work of the ensemble deserve articles of their own) but it's the brilliance of the writing that strikes the most, because of Rogers' ability to manipulate genre to his convenience. Rather than using genre elements for exploitation, he creates a hybrid that has us moved by courtroom scenes, sees us

tense during domestic arguments and has us laughing over the nonsensical nature of war. Rogers is a master at using elements of drama to create worlds that thrive, but never depend, on references. From the gender-bending names of the siblings, to their undoubtedly Oedipal fixation on dating people who remind them of their absent father, not to mention the introduction of a "Chekhov punch" (the payoff is perfection!), Rogers has created a work that's alive in more than one way. A testament to permanence that reminds us that our world isn't bound by the rooms we inhabit, but by the walls within our minds.



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Written by: Jose Solis (<https://stagebuddy.com/author/jose-solis>)

Jose Solis is the Chief Theatre Critic at StageBuddy.com. He has been writing about film and theatre since 2003 and his work has appeared in major film and theatre publications including The New York Times, American Theatre, and Backstage. He is a member of the Drama Desk, the Society of LGBTQ Entertainment Critics, and the Online Film Critics Society. When he's not at a show, a screening or writing about all the art he loves, you can find him singing along to any cast recording featuring Kelli O'Hara.

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# THE BROADWAY BLOG

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## REVIEW: 'THE HONEYCOMB TRILOGY'

by Alex Robinson



*The Honeycomb Trilogy, Part 1: Advance Man (photo: Deborah Alexander via The Broadway Blog.)*

Given all the media in which to tackle science fiction, a stage production is surely the most challenging. Unlike a novel, which is limited only by the author (and reader's) imagination, or the latest Hollywood blockbuster crammed full of CGI wizardry, theater demands that any special effects be practical (reproducible night after night) and also stand up to close scrutiny. How do you present an epic science fiction trilogy in the intimate setting of a small theatre? Gideon Productions' staging of *The Honeycomb Trilogy* by Mac Rogers and playing in repertory at The Gym at Judson, sets out to do exactly that. The result is a both epic and personal.

*The Honeycomb Trilogy* consists of three plays, each running about two hours. The first, *Advance Man*, takes place two years after the first manned mission to Mars and, in an unexpected twist for a science fiction trilogy, takes place entirely in the living room of a suburban home in Coral Gables, Florida. At its onset, the play feels more domestic drama than sci-fi: Housewife Amelia (Kristen Vaughn) suspects her husband Bill is having an affair and hires a private eye (Ana Maria Jomocla) to get to the bottom of things. Only the presence of mentally challenged former-astronaut Conor (stand out Jason Howard) hints at the ominous things to come.

It turns out Bill does have a secret but it has less to do with another woman and more about another race—the aliens he and his fellow astronauts encountered on their last trip to space.

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*The Honeycomb Trilogy, Part II: Blast Radius (photo: Deborah Alexander via The Broadway Blog)*

Writing (and performing) science fiction dialogue is tricky since it usually involves having to include exposition that, in the wrong hands, can come across as silly or technobabble. Playwright Rogers, however, does a good job balancing on the tightrope and cannily doles out just enough information to keep you intrigued and guessing until the pieces come together. By then you're fully invested in the world he's created.

The actors treat the material with gravitas. Sean Williams is coldly confident as plotting husband Bill and Becky Byers does an excellent job as his daughter Ronnie—particularly in the second play, *Blast Radius*, (which takes place 12 years after *Advance Man*) where we see her changed from a cynical, funny teenager to a jaded young adult. Ronnie's transformation continues into *Sovereign*, where she's played by Hanna Cheek.

With each play we see the living room set (designed by Sandy Yaklin) transformed to reflect the drama going on around it—the cozy, familiar setting becomes a ramshackle refuge in *Blast Radius* and a post-apocalyptic kangaroo court in *Sovereign*. It's an appropriate setting since at its core, like another science fiction trilogy making the news, *The Honeycomb Trilogy* is about family. Earthy Ronnie and her more idealistic brother (played by David Rosenblatt in the first play and Stephen Heskett in *Sovereign*) are the centerpieces of a story about humanity's future.

Interested parties can see *The Honeycomb Trilogy* in two ways: catch performances of the individual plays on weekday evenings, but if you have the time—and stamina—I encourage seeing their weekend “binge watch” productions in which all three are staged back to back. Sharing the experience with the actors and watching their characters evolve, grow and in some cases die as the world around them is turned upside down makes for an immensely satisfying day (and night) of theater.

#### *The Honeycomb Trilogy*

The Gym at Judson

55 Washington Square South

Through November 14

*Alex Robinson's books include Box Office Poison, Tricked, Too Cool to Be Forgotten, and the forthcoming Our Expanding Universe, all of which are available from Top Shelf Productions. He is also co-host of the podcast Star*



*The Honeycomb Trilogy, Part III: Sovereign, featuring Steven Heskett (photo: Deborah Alexander via The Broadway Blog.)*

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## THEATRE

## Advance Man Is Why We Need More Sci-Fi In Theater

Natalie Zutter

Fri Jan 20, 2012 5:30pm | 2 comments | Favorite This



If you want to make an argument for bringing science fiction to live theater, look no further than Mac Rogers' *Advance Man*, both a compelling family drama and a bleak vision of Earth's future.

*Advance Man* is the first play in Rogers' *Honeycomb Trilogy*, a veritable sci-fi epic running as part of the BFG Collective's six-month residency at the Secret Theatre. (The BFG Collective is made up of three theater companies, including Rogers' company Gideon Productions.) The play centers on the family of Bill Cooke, world-renowned astronaut who led the first successful manned mission to Mars. It's been three years since Bill and his crew returned, with one member dead and the other, Conor, mentally handicapped from an unexplained accident.

What appears at first to be a story about Bill caught between the intimate, closely guarded secrecy of his crew and his curious, flawed family becomes a slow-building thriller concerning the illicit cargo that the astronauts brought back with them from Mars.

Their "green initiative" is anything but beneficial to the planet and reflects a startling fanaticism brought on by their shared experience in space. Rogers skillfully grounds his high-

concept plot by confining all of the action to the Cookes' living room, perhaps the most mundane setting for the hatching of a planetwide conspiracy. However, the presence of Conor (Jason Howard, playing brain-damaged with fantastic sensitivity and intensity) pushes into every scene like the elephant in the room; he stands in his favorite corner, seemingly oblivious to the familial and political dramas unfolding around him.

I've been a fan of Rogers' work since I saw his stunning play *Viral* in 2009. Rogers has a knack for highlighting the kind of modern stories that you don't often see in theater, but that are just as universal as the themes explored by classic playwrights. His plays explore assisted suicide, the uniting power of the internet, and now, the displacement and panic of returning to Earth after years spent in space.

What's incredible to witness in theater is a character with such a powerful grasp of words. Bill Cooke (Sean Williams) can cajole and tease anyone in his life, from rich investors to his supportive family, to act exactly as he needs them to. His ability to say the right thing in every situation ensures that those around him will bring his plans to fruition or remain blissfully ignorant.



Across the board, all of the performances are incredible. Despite Bill's jovial nature, it's clear that his family is suffering from his physical and now emotional absence: Wife Amelia (Kristen Vaughan) suspects he's having an affair, while daughter Ronnie (Becky Byers) has to defend



her more delicate brother Abbie (David Rosenblatt) at school. Byers and Rosenblatt have incredible chemistry as brother and sister; one of the play's best scenes is a teasing discussion about "finger-blasting."

As Bill's "work family," the other astronauts almost seem to represent different sides of one person: There's the bitter Raf (Abraham Makany), who used to consider Conor his best friend; hot-headed Belinda (Rebecca Comtois, who I would have liked to see more of after her wonderful turn in *Viral*); and voice of reason Valerie (Shaun Bennet Wilson).

Because *Advance Man* is, in some ways, at the "infant" stage of this trilogy, it makes sense that it would be about nurturing new life and seditious thought. That's how Amelia and Bill are alike in a key way. Each encourages development and self-awareness: Amelia in nursing Conor back to health, and Bill engendering strength in Ronnie and smarts in Abbie. (Though if the synopses of *Blast Radius* and *Sovereign* are any indication, Bill will come to regret establishing this binary in his children.)

Rogers doesn't really answer the dramatic question "why tonight?" in a traditional way. What seems to be the pivotal scene, the astronauts' dinner with investor Kip (Brian Silliman) to get funding for their green initiative, is only one cog in a master scheme. The question is more "why now?", with "now" being this era of global warming, oil shortage, and other environmental crises.

In many ways, the play is about conditioning yourself for an unknown future. Amelia is bracing herself for the revelation that Bill's late nights with his crew means he's having an affair. Almost as consuming as Bill's work is his need to indoctrinate his children. When he tells Ronnie about how she's an adult "in the world we have now," there's something menacing about how you can't tell if it's a compliment or a warning.

*Advance Man* runs through January 29 at the Secret Theatre in Queens (44-02 23rd Street), Thursdays-Saturdays 8 p.m. and Sundays at 3 p.m. There will be an additional performance on Monday, January 23 at 8 p.m. Tickets are \$18, \$15 for students.

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**Natalie Zutter** is a playwright, foodie, and the co-creator of *Leftovers*, a webcomic about food trucks in the zombie apocalypse. She's currently the Associate Editor at **Crushable**, where she discusses movies, celebrity culture, and internet memes, and one of the Playwrights-in-Residence at **True False Theatre**. You can find her on **Twitter**.

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