

## THEATER

## REVIEW

## ‘Snow White’ unashamedly breaks the rules

By Wei-Huan Chen

Donald Barthelme once said his first attempts as a writer were in an “ersatz Hemingway fashion,” the results of which disappointed him greatly.

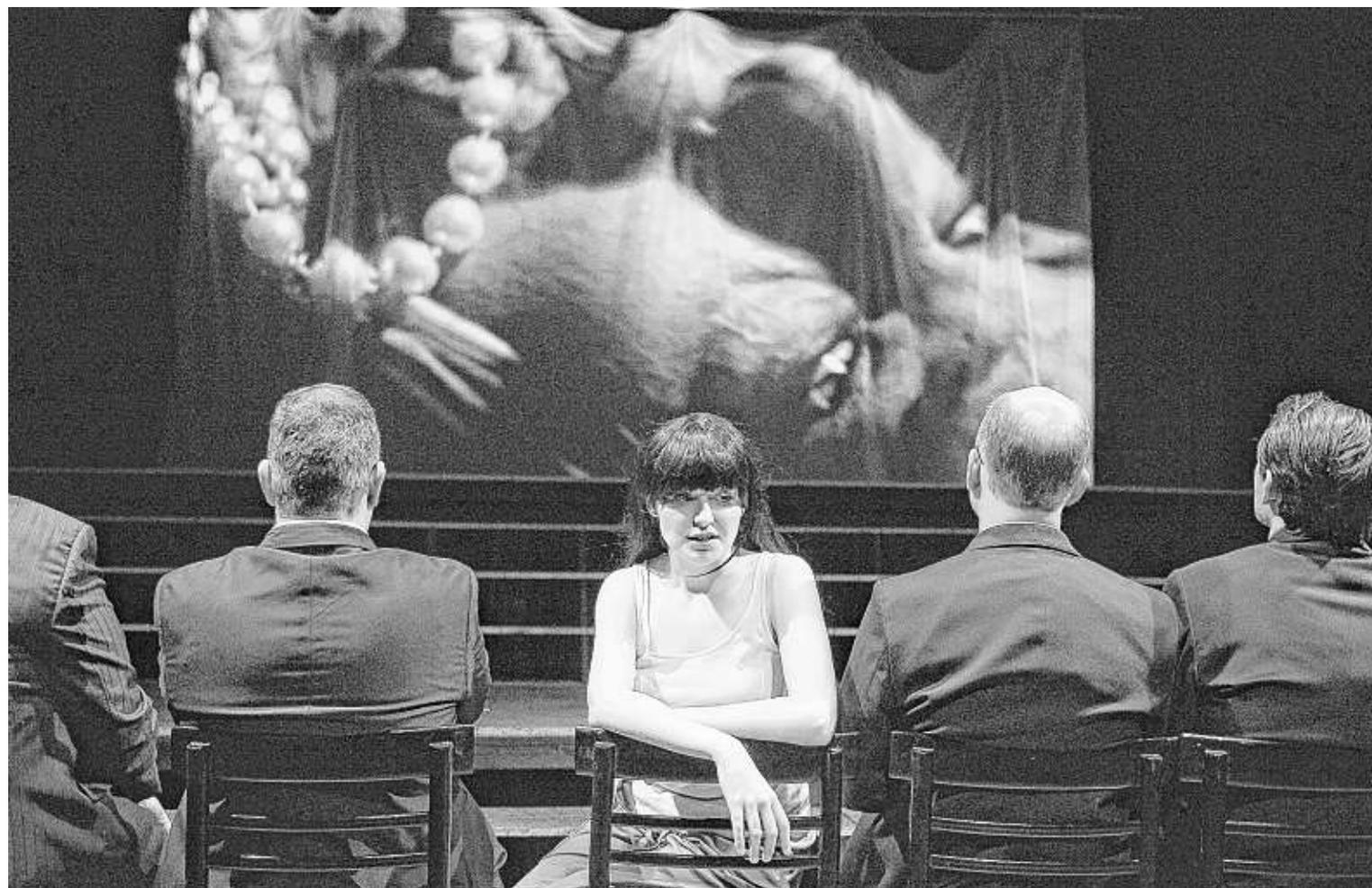
When Samuel Beckett exploded in the 1950s, Barthelme felt energized but knew that he must not imitate the writer, since Beckett himself, by defying James Joyce, had set a standard of upending tradition.

And so, like many of the great alchemists of form — Marcel Duchamp, Jean-Luc Godard — Barthelme’s experimentation was less the anti-establishment anger of a literary punk and more the aesthetic inquiries of a creative individual. The idea that stories must have heroes, conflicts and climaxes was, to Barthelme, terribly mundane. He could do better.

Which is to say that everything that makes the first-ever stage adaptation of his 1967 postmodern novella “Snow White” exciting involves breaking rules.

Seen in a dim light, this intellectual roller coaster of a play — 20 years in the making by Greg Dean and the Catastrophic Theatre — could be miscast as scattered and opaque. But judged using the right mindset, which is one that believes language can be suspenseful and satisfying even without the foundation of narrative clarity, “Snow White” has every bit the brilliant formal playfulness of the original text, with the added benefits of music, color and raunchiness.

In a remarkable moment for avant-garde art in Houston, Catastrophic Theatre, in partnership with Inprint, the Barthelme Estate and University of Houston’s CounterCurrent 17 festival, has made claim to Barthelme, who died in 1989, as not only a New Yorker-approved writer’s writer but as Houston’s most provocative narrative



Anthony Rathbun

Coralee Young stars as the title character in Catastrophic Theatre’s “Snow White.”

demolitionist.

After all, the fact that the production brings new life to the Barthelme legacy, not to mention assert Houston’s artistically vibrant Midtown, was not lost with all the hype leading up to Friday’s premiere. And while audiences might not have unanimously liked or understood Dean’s loud, sometimes campy adaptation, which played up the sex, gravitas and comedy of the novella by way of big physical performances, no one was debating that they were witness to a special event.

Coralee Young plays the lithe

### ‘Snow White’

**When:** 8 p.m. Thursdays-Saturdays, through May 6  
**Where:** MATCH, 3400 Main  
**Tickets:** Pay what you can, \$35 suggested donation, catastrophictheatre.com

beauty at the heart of the play, a sighing modern-day princess whose ebony hair, draped over her window, draws gazes from men with the intensity and frequency of a peep show. Rather than the virginal child popularized by Disney, Snow White is the center of a sneowy yet somehow touchingly

yearning polyamorous relationship with seven men who operate a factory that churns out baby food marketed to Chinese people.

Leading these men is Bill, embodied with gravitas and pathos by the phenomenal Luis Galindo. His unexplained tragic outlook on life becomes a problem for his housemates, who demand a proper reason for his opting out of their scheduled orgiastic activities. No man can match his magnetic gloom but Hogo, played by the devilish Jeff Miller, a nihilist who loves to say vile things at random. If Bill was Camus’ hero, then Hogo would

be Nietzsche’s. And if Bill’s the most dramatically compelling character, then Hogo’s the most amusingly crass.

Still not entirely sure what “Snow White” is about? The insertion of Paul (Greg Cote), as a prince figure, and Jane (Courtney Lomelo, breathing sparkling, venomous energy into the show), as the supposed witch, do little to ground the story in anything you’d expect from a fairy tale.

“Snow White” is indeed a defiance of the need to understand. Lines unfold with surprise after surprise. Every

**‘Snow White’ continues on D10**

## THEATER

### 'Snow White' from page D9

monologue becomes its own devious little narrative, a vignette about what one character thinks about one thing — like Freud, or poems about loss — whose connection to everything else is metaphysical at best. Dean captures Barthelme's roving style with the deft hand of a longtime fan, retaining the language's vague yet strangely specific nature.

To talk about "Snow White" in terms of category, after all, would be like asking what kind of religion atheism is. It isn't. And to say that Barthelme is postmodern or absurdist does no justice to how different his writing is from Beckett, Thomas Pynchon, Steven Millhauser or David Foster

Wallace.

"Snow White" is a tonal, intellectual, emotional and aesthetic hodgepodge that, by staying true to the writer's voice, nevertheless retains a sense of singularity.

The only negative side effect of the page-to-stage translation is rhythm, with moments, like a cringe-inducing Chinese fan dance, that linger too long.

Aside from that misplaced musical interlude, I was surprised at how much of the adaptation was unfiltered and literal, and how much of the humor still worked.

Dean, playing a shadowy narrator with a dry wit, simply reads passages from the novella out loud, to great effect. And, as in the stage adaptation of "The Curious Incident of the

Dog in the Night-Time," "Snow White" throws the unconventional formats from the text onto a projection screen, displaying images such as a vertical line of dots representing the titular character's beauty marks, a long quote by Sigmund Freud and thoughtful yet mischievous titles like "THE FAILURE OF SNOW WHITE'S ARSE."

Barthelme's conceptual acrobatics are taken at face value rather than scrutinized for symbolism, which, in my opinion, is always the best way to read him.

Viewed as a whole, Catastrophic's staging — set by Ryan McGettigan, video by Full Media Jacket — is a nod toward abstract expressionism, featuring windows that are too big and that lean

too far to the left or right. In a stirring scene, Snow White and her so-called dwarves watch a movie that's stolen straight from "Nosferatu." F. W. Murnau's 1922 film is the perfect reference point for a production filled with sharp angles, wide eyes and campy thrills, and it's when the actors embrace such atmospheric moments that the show rises from its messy, sometimes inconsistent energy and reaches sublimity: Miller chortling with a monocle in his eye. Galindo chased by a pair of headlights in the middle of the night, imagining it's a childhood nightmare manifested as a black horse. Lomelo cackling over a poisonous concoction, her schoolgirl uniform an ironic gesture of innocence in this midlife-crisis world of lust, vengeance and ennui.

As theater, "Snow White" now has more room to both fail and thrill.

But this production has no interest in perfection, and its best scenes show us just how dastardly and entertaining Barthelme was. Favoring chaos over continuity, the Catastrophic Theatre's "Snow White" is less a stream of consciousness than a Jackson Pollock splatter of bold, conflicting ideas. It makes an undeniable case for Barthelme's genius, recalling what New Yorker editor Roger Angell once said, that his stories were "rich and elusive, evanescent and nutritious, profound and hilarious, brief and long-term, trifling and heartbreaking, daunting to some readers and to others a snap, a breeze, a draft of life."

wchen@chron.com  
twitter.com/weihuanchen

## Houston writer behind 'Snow White'

By Alyson Ward

Donald Barthelme, who wrote the sex-charged version of "Snow White" playing at Catastrophic Theatre and the Counter-Current 17 festival, is one of the nation's best-known postmodern writers and one of Houston's favorite sons. The short-story writer and novelist grew up here, moved to New York to build his career, then returned to teach writing, continuing his family's long association with the University of Houston.

His father, the modern architect Donald Barthelme Sr., taught architecture at UH and at Rice University. After Donald Jr. attended UH, he served in the U.S. Army and wrote for the Houston Post. In the early 1960s, he spent a year as director of the Contemporary Arts Museum Houston. Then he moved to New York and almost immediately started writing for a national audience.

In the 1960s, '70s and '80s, Barthelme's funny, wildly innovative short stories appeared regularly in the New Yorker. He published a steady stream of novels and story collections, including "Snow White" (1967), "Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts" (1968) and "Paradise" (1986). He counted himself among what he called "the alleged postmodernists" — writers such as John Hawkes and Thomas Pynchon. But he also experimented with other types of writing. In 1972, he won the National Book Award for the children's book "The Slightly Irregular Fire Engine."



Houston Post file

**Donald Barthelme worked at the Houston Post as an entertainment reporter and critic.**

At New York's American Place Theatre, Barthelme worked with Wynn Handman adapting his novel "Snow White" into a play. In 1976, the theater presented a reading, which Barthelme found enlightening. He later acknowledged that he was disappointed in the play he had written. Working from Barthelme's notes and the novel, Catastrophic's team is presenting the world premiere of Barthelme's "Snow White."

Barthelme returned to Houston in 1979 to teach in the University of Houston's graduate creative writing program, which was just getting started. In 1982, he and writer Phillip Lopate co-founded the student-run literary journal *Domestic Crude*; a few years later, it was renamed *Gulf Coast*, the name under which it's still published.

Barthelme was the director of the UH writing program when he died of cancer in 1989 at the age of 58.

alyson.ward@chron.com

THE "ORIGINAL" CLASSIC INTERNATIONAL  
**GEM & JEWELRY SHOW INC.**

50th Anniversary

FINE JEWELRY | ESTATE PIECES  
LOOSE GEMS | DAZZLING BEADS  
ACCESSORIES | MUCH MORE!

ONCE YOU DISCOVER THE INTERNATIONAL GEM AND JEWELRY SHOW YOU WILL NEVER WANT TO BUY JEWELRY ANYWHERE ELSE!

OPEN TO THE PUBLIC

**DON'T MISS THIS SHOW**  
3 Days Only!  
**APRIL 14 - 16**  
Fri. 12 PM - 6 PM • Sat. 10 AM - 6 PM  
Sun. 11 AM - 5 PM

The first 50 people in line each day receive a FREE InterGem Shopping Bag!

Like Us On Facebook • [www.InterGem.com](http://www.InterGem.com)

\*Get a free copy of the 50th Anniversary Spring edition of Gems & Jewelry Magazine featuring valuable coupons, vendor profiles as well as informative and entertaining stories.  
\*Children 8 and under not admitted. No Photography.

Present this ad and take  
**\$2 OFF**  
ADMISSION

SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE AT ANY  
**BUDGET**  
@ nrgcenter