



Theater review

Elephant Deal

By Kris Vire

500 Clown at [Steppenwolf](#). Created by 500 Clown and John Fournier. Music and lyrics by Fournier. Dir. Leslie Buxbaum Danzig. With Molly Brennan, Adrian Danzig, Paul Kalina.



FLASHBACK SEQUINS Brennan sparkles.
Photo: Michael Brosilow

The layers upon performative layers of a 500 Clown show blossom thick and lush: Creators Brennan, Danzig and Kalina take on clown personas that adopt further identities in pursuit of literary deconstruction. These densely packed depths make an ideal match for the source material of this new show. The latest addition to the troupe's brief repertory—*500 Clown and Elephant Deal* is the decade-old group's fourth work—plays (very freely) on an idea from Brecht's *Man Is Man*, in which a gent is persuaded to forsake his own identity for a new one: A civilian becomes a cold-blooded soldier.

The performance takes the form of a cabaret led by Brennan, supported by Fournier's live band and her clown compatriots (with new additions Matt Hawkins and Jessica Hudson). As they clamber around Jim Moore's scaffolds-and-blank-space set, they trade identities

like baseball cards; the rules of the “game” become less and less clear, while the mood grows steadily more unsettled. The action spills into the house as Kalina enlists the audience to protect him from his fellow clowns.

Elephant Deal never fails to command our attention. Fournier’s vaudeville/Weill score grounds us at the intersection of truth and fiction, engagement and entertainment. And the ensemble’s live-wire connection to its audience, rendering the performance both polished and infinitely malleable, only enhances the show’s rough-and-tumble, invigorating interrogation of identity.

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