



# RenegadeBus

Culture and the Curious in Dallas, Texas

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## A Poetic White Noise

**Theater Review: *Port Twilight or the History of Science* makes its world premiere at the Undermain Theatre through December 12.**

by David Novinski



Does anyone remember static? Thick, cottony, hiss through which you could barely hear your radio or the fickle snow and ghostly fog through which you strained to see your television program? Well, it is almost gone now. In the digital world, the sound is either there or it's not. The picture may freeze, but it will never gently, dreamily cloud your show.

Technology has worked harder and harder to eliminate static. Things are clearer, but what do we lose? Gone are the dreamlike flights of imagination that the irregular, uncontrollable static afforded. There's poetry in the gap between ideas and words that don't quite fit cleanly. Less mess is less poetry, less fantasy.

*Photo courtesy of the Undermain Theatre*

Well, Len Jenkins isn't afraid of static. His latest play, *Port Twilight or the History of Science* is enjoying its world premiere at the [Undermain Theatre](#). *Port Twilight* is a town somewhere near Twin Peaks and it uses static-like poetry to help the audience across the divide to a realm of fantasy and frivolity. A place where scientists dance and a wandering Rabbi wonders and everybody worries about what is going to happen to us humans. There are weighty themes woven amongst the collage of silly science fiction, but they serve to ballast this floating balloon and keep us upright.

The enterprise takes some time to get underway. Jenkins seems to use exposition as almost as white noise. The information comes out fast and awkward like words from a pushy poet. It is not until Jonathon Brooks as Dak hits his stride as co-narrator do we begin to feel comfortable enough to succumb to this world of weird. Dak is combination Lounge Lizard and Steve Martin. Just when you are ready to write him off you want to lean closer so as not miss something.

Fair warning: there are lots of plot lines and actors doubling. But the collage effect of juxtaposition and dialectic gives the play some of its gravitas at the same time affording it needed levity. Nothing dates you faster than attempting science fiction. Look at any depiction of the future and you can always tell when it was made. So, the safest route to delving these fantasy conundrums is through gentle jibs and jabs. In fact, one of the only missteps of the evening was a serious attempt to depict an alien.

Technically, you won't see another production of this sort done better. The Undermain and director Katherine Owens have been at it for some time, but now they have heavy hitters like John Arnone, who won the Tony for Tommy, designing for them. Arnone's set was perfectly suitable to the texts jumbling juxtaposition of plot and thought. More impressive, though, was the sets usability. Scenes flowed as fast as author Jenkins could imagine them. Steve Woods' lights trickled and fickled the fantasy so well, you forget you're in a basement. Giva Taylor got to have the most fun, though, with futuristic costumes. Two words: bubble wrap. Last mention goes to the sound design which bewitched, bothered and bewildered the last bits of resistance I had to going through the static to the other side. Ironically, the caramel voice of KERA, served us that complicated delight. Hats off to Bruce DuBose for his sound design and his performances as Rabbi and B movie producer.

This is a production not to be missed. It begins with all the anxious awkwardness of the beginnings of any party. And just like any party there are boring conversations and people you have to suffer, but at some point the poseurs leave and the group is comfortable enough to simply be in silence. Then, in that moment when folks are at their most real and least guarded, you realize why you came: to share in your humanity. Though this play is pretty anxious about the future it leaves you pretty positive about the present. And what a present that is.