

THE ELVIS NATIONAL THEATER OF OKINAWA

By Jonathan Lethem and Lukas Jaeger

Here's a funny and razor-sharp look at the World of Tomorrow. And you thought *today* was weird! You ain't seen *nothing* yet!

Jonathan Lethem is yet another one of those talented new writers who are continu-ing to pop up all over as we progress into the decade of the 1990s. He works at an antiquarian bookstore, writes slogans for buttons, and lyrics for several rock bands (including *Two Fettered Apes*, *EDO*, *Jolley Ramey*, and *Feet Wet*), and is also the creator of the 'Dr. Sphincter' character on MTV. In addition to all these certifiably cool credentials, Lethem has also had sales in the last few years to *Interzone*, *New Pathways*, *Pulphouse*, *Isaac Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine*, *Universe*, *Journal Wired*, *Marion Zimmer Bradley's Fantasy Magazine*, *Aboriginal SF*, and elsewhere; his first novel, *Gun, with Occasional Music*, is slotted for 1994. His story "Walking the Moons" was in our Eighth Annual Collection.

Lukas Jaeger is a graduate of the Boston School of the Museum of Fine Arts. He is an animator and cartoonist, and his first two films, *Dimwit's Day* and *It's You*, have been shown in festivals worldwide. His current film-in-progress is called *Big Concrete Place*.

Both men live in the San Francisco Bay area, and this is their first collaboration.

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Sam's Big Kinesthetic went down the Blind Alleyway to check out Tokyo Norton's new act: the Elvis National Theatre of Okinawa. Sam's Big was a threesome consisting of a neuropublicity agent, a talent development scout, and a bush-robot that hooked them into the infodrip, and into one another. They all went by the name Sam's Big, and they never walked alone.

Tokyo Norton ran a noisy, credit-chip-sized stage in darkest Das Englen, but he had a nose for imported novelties. Sam's Big had to keep its finger on the pulse.

"You wanna wanna put Ento on the big show?" jabbered Norton after the revue was closed. They whirred above the rooftop of the Alleyway in Norton's ramjet gazebo. The emotional kaleidoscope on Norton's forehead performed an

unnecessary flourish, which annoyed Sam's Big.

"I don't know," said Sam's Big. "There's something there—"

"For truly understand Ento," said Norton, "I have to give context." He snorted. "Is cultivated secretly, according to ancient stricture. No foreigner has ever seen before. Is guild of monks perform ancient mysteries. Not just song and dance."

"The whole thing's an ancient ritual?" mused Sam's Big. "The weird karate kicks, the whole bit with the handkerchiefs . . . that wild number about 'Pork Salad Ani'?"

"Oh yes, oh yes. Quite elaborate and mysterious."

"What's the reference, though? What's 'Elvis'?"

"Impersonation of 'Elvis' medieval Japanese folk art. Origins shrouded in veils of misty time. Forgotten meanings, buried in layers of abstraction. Foreigner never see before—"

"Yeah, yeah." Sam's Big knew perfectly well that ninety per cent of what passed for Jap culture was filched from overseas, and usually garbled to incomprehensibility in the process. It didn't matter. The point was, this Ento drama had something at the core, something interesting. "The whole look," Sam's Big said, "the sideburns, the pallid, fatty physique. Cosmurgery?"

"Oh no," fretted Norton. "Physical regimen of take years to produce, very demanding. Eat only corndogs, amphetamines—"

"The round-eyed kid," interrupted Sam's Big. "What's he doing there?"

Norton waved his hand, his kaleidoscope darkening. "Very poor performer, the American. Is worst of bunch—"

"An American? I thought this was some exclusive Jap cult."

"Is significant achievement," admitted Norton. "First foreigner ever to rise to any prominence, devotion of many hard ministrations, cleaning toilet with toothbrush . . . but cannot be compared with native talent. Is hothead, over expressive, where calls for control, devotion, conformity to tradition—"

"He sticks out like a sore thumb," agreed Sam's Big, thinking hard. "Uh, yeah. That's the one we want. What's his name?"

"Oh no!" pleaded Tokyo Norton. "Cannot have one! Ento is performance *en masse*—"

“We can’t use the group thing. But we might be able to do something with this American kid. What’s his name?”

“No, please no. Integrity of ancient ways; I protest!” Norton took an egg-shaped rubber napkin out of his pocket and rolled it around his forehead to absorb his sweat. “Not for cheap bastardisation did bring Ento to new world!”

“It’s not Ento we want,” said Sam’s Big. “All that shmaltzy ‘In the Ghetto’ stuff; it’s hopeless. We’re just after a few of the moves, the style, especially the way that American kid manifests it...what’s his name?”

“Lucky Davey,” sighed Norton. He pushed the obloid end of the rubber napkin into his ear, his kaleidoscope flaring green. The gazebo settled down to earth behind the Alleyway. Tokyo Norton cleared the dressing room of all the Ento stars except Lucky Davey, then ushered Sam’s Big in. Davey sat at a mirror daubing at his pancake. Sam’s Big came up behind him, smoking a stogie and flicking the ash into a hovering holographic ashtray, and met the kid’s eyes in the mirror. Norton hung on the perimeter, fretting as he watched Sam’s Big’s ashes fluttering through the projection to scatter on the floor.

“I am an Ento performer,” said Lucky Davey, his eyes flaring defiantly. “Steeped in the traditions of ‘Elvis’ impersonation. I don’t know if you understand what that means, Misters Big.”

“Serious ancient ritual bunkum, I gather. Make no mistake, Davey, we’re full of admiration. You’ve risen to the top on their terms. But the point’s made; now why not see if you can make it on the big stage? You’re an American, Davey.”

“This is surely the degrading crass sell-out opportunity I was carefully steeled to resist in my long training,” said Davey. He was stripping off the white jumpsuit and changing into his street clothes: a leather Thneed and a pair of fishnet earmuffs. “Certainly then if you admire my discipline you must understand how I will be quite able to resist the flickering of your devil’s-tongue in my ear, yes?”

“This is no sell-out,” said Sam’s Big, flexing its anger. Sam’s Big knew when to bring on the effects. “We’re talking Art, son. Taking what you picked up from the ancient masters and building on it, creating something new. That’s assuming you’ve got more to offer the world than *devotion*, of course. Maybe we guessed wrong ...” Sam’s Big turned to leave the dressing room.

“Wait, Misters Big.”

Sam’s Big turned back, all smiles, and pocketed the cigar. The phantom ashtray vanished. Sam’s Big unlatched their goosedown briefcase, which, when opened, played the theme song from the *Kinesthetic Tonight!* program. It was full of

unsigned contracts, enticingly perfumed, and attractively backlit from within the briefcase. Tokyo Norton shook his head sorrowfully. The floor was covered with ashes.

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Three weeks later, in a high-security rehearsal bubble at the bottom of the Atlantic, the cans were filling with bungled performance tape. They were scraping away to that essential core, the glimmer Sam's Big had discerned the first night out, but the kid had a lot to unlearn.

"Drop the formalism," said Sam's Big for the hundredth time. "Stick with the crouch move, and that big leering wink, but make it your own. Make it like you feel it, like it's from inside."

They'd lightened up his make-up, lost him a little weight, clipped the sideburns, generally emphasised his youth and vitality. It wasn't enough. The kid was like a withered old Japanese monk in his heart. He was tending to the fundamentally rude gestures of Ento drama like a gardener shaping a bonsai. Sam's Big wanted to see the kid *rebel*.

It was the songs, they knew. "The American Trilogy," "Hawaiian Wedding Song," "It's Now or Never/O Sole Mio," "Bridge Over Troubled Water." Old soupy Jap stuff, too heavy on the heartstrings. The kid needed something punchier, something to wrap those smouldering looks around, something that gave all that funny hip motion a reason for being.

Soon, soon. Sam's Big had its handpicked songwriting subroutine busy at work on some titles he'd suggested: "Don't Shit Me," "Hot Nervous Wire," "Baby Let's Die," "Warning: Contaminated," "Drug Test Man," and "Mys-tery Fuck."

Sam's Big took a sip from a tube of Big Man, a cigar-favored soft drink, and smiled among themselves. They'd get it right soon enough.