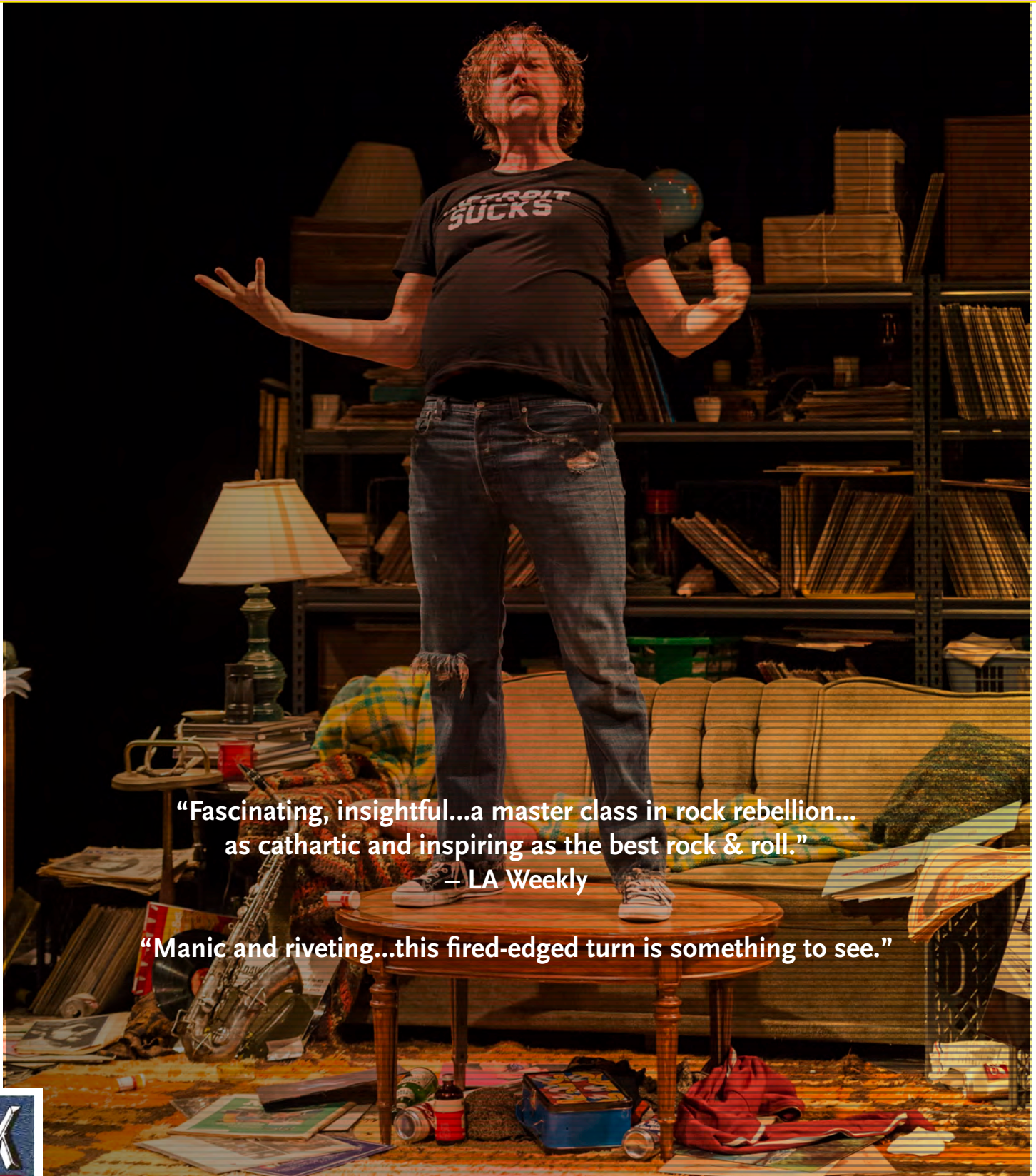


# HOW TO BE A ROCK CRITIC

Based on the Writings of Lester Bangs  
By Jessica Blank & Erik Jensen  
Directed by Jessica Blank



“Fascinating, insightful...a master class in rock rebellion...  
as cathartic and inspiring as the best rock & roll.”  
— LA Weekly

“Manic and riveting...this fired-edged turn is something to see.”



# ABOUT HOW TO BE A ROCK CRITIC

Gonzo journalist, America's greatest rock critic and inventor of the word "punk," legendary music writer Lester Bangs was an American icon. Outsized, manic, fucked-up and impossibly creative, Lester traveled with some of the most iconic musical figures of the 20th century- The Clash, Bob Marley, Lou Reed -peeling away the veneer between "star" and audience and revealing the "greats" as flawed and failing humans. He was at once irreligious and messianic about his hopes for the future, humanity in general, and music in particular. Music could save the world. At least that's what you tell yourself when you start out. But when the ragged, rebel ethos of the seventies gave way to the corporate pop of the eighties, Lester lost the myth he'd built a life around, and died of a drug overdose in 1982. This solo play by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen (award-winning writers of THE EXONERATED and AFTERMATH) adapts Lester's own writing to chart the life, work and death of one of the 20th century's most ground-breaking, risk-taking, pioneering voices.

**Set Design**

**Light Design**

**Sound Design**

**Dramaturgy**

**Richard Hoover**

**Lap Chi-Chu**

**David Robbins**

**P. Carl**

## UPCOMING DATES:

**May 11-21 ArtsEmerson, Boston, MA**

**July 6-30 Steppenwolf Theater, Chicago, IL**

## TOUR DETAILS:

**Capacity: 100 – 750**

**Stage: Proscenium / Black Box**

**Tour Personnel: Up to 7**







# BIOGRAPHIES

**JESSICA BLANK & ERIK JENSEN** are actors, writers and directors. Together, they are authors of *THE EXONERATED*, a play based on interviews they conducted with over 40 wrongfully convicted death row inmates across the United States. *THE EXONERATED* won Lucille Lortel, Outer Critics Circle, Drama Desk, Ovation, Fringe First and Herald Angel Awards, and was nominated for the Hull-Warriner Award and the John Gassner Playwriting Award; it has also received awards from Amnesty International, the American Bar Association, the National Association of Criminal Defense Lawyers, Death Penalty Focus, and Court TV, and was listed by the New York Times as “the number 1 play of the year.” It has been translated into Spanish, French, Italian and Japanese, and was made into an award-winning movie adapted by Jessica and Erik and starring Susan Sarandon, Danny Glover, Brian Dennehy, Aidan Quinn and Delroy Lindo. *Living Justice*,

Jessica and Erik’s book on the making of *THE EXONERATED*, was published in 2005 by Simon and Schuster. Their documentary play *AFTER-MATH*, based on interviews they conducted with Iraqi civilian refugees in Jordan and directed by Jessica, opened New York Theater Workshop’s 2009-10 Off-Broadway season to rave reviews, was a New York Times Critics’ Pick, toured internationally for two years and was nominated for two Drama League Awards. Their new play, *HOW TO BE A ROCK CRITIC* (based on the writings of Lester Bangs), under commission at CTG, was workshopped at the Public Theater and the La Jolla Playhouse, recently completed a sold-out run at the Kirk Douglas Theater in Los Angeles, with Erik starring and Jessica directing and will be seen at theaters around the US in the 2016-17 season. Their next documentary play, about the 2010 Upper Big Branch Mine disaster, is currently under commission at the

Public Theater, with original music by Grammy Award-winning musician Steve Earle. Jessica and Erik wrapped production in November 2016 on the feature film adaptation of her novel *ALMOST HOME* (Hyperion, 2007); they adapted and co-directed, with a festival release slated for 2018. Jessica and Erik recently completed the pilot *THE NEGOTIATOR* for Gaumont TV (exec producer Tom Fontana); they have developed for television with Fox TV Studios, 20th Century TV, Avenue Pictures, Sunswept Entertainment, Virgin Produced, and Radical Media, and currently have a feature in development with Cary Brokaw/Avenue Pictures. They are married and live in Brooklyn with their daughter Sadie.

**JESSICA BLANK (Co-writer and Director)** co-wrote the play *LIBERTY CITY* with April Yvette Thompson and directed its Off-Broadway production at New York Theater Workshop (Lucille Lortel, Drama Desk, and Outer Critics Circle noms). Her second novel, *KARMA FOR BEGINNERS*, was published by Hyperion in 2009 and her third is forthcoming from Penguin in 2018. As an actor, Jessica appeared regularly as the lead's loudmouthed big sister in CBS' *MADE IN JERSEY*. Additional TV credits include the pilot of *HIGH MAINTENANCE* for HBO, *BLUE BLOODS*, *ELEMENTARY*, *THE FOLLOWING*, *THE MENTALIST*, *BORED TO DEATH*, *RESCUE ME*, *LAW AND ORDER: CI*, *THE BRONX IS BURNING*, and several more. Film acting credits include *THE NAMESAKE* (dir. Mira Nair), *THE EXONERATED*, and several indies including *CREATIVE CONTROL* (SXSW Grand Jury Prize, 2015), *ON THE ROAD WITH JUDAS* (Sundance) and *YOU'RE NOBODY TILL SOMEBODY KILLS YOU* (prod. Spike Lee). She has acted in theaters throughout New York City and has three new films coming out in 2017.

**ERIK JENSEN (Co-writer and Performer)** TV acting credits include major arcs on *THE WALKING DEAD* and *MR. ROBOT*, leads in the CBS pilot *SECOND SIGHT*, NBC pilot *THE FRONTIER* and Fox TV movie *VIRTUALITY* (dir. Peter Berg). He appeared as baseball legend Thurman Munson in miniseries *THE BRONX IS BURNING*, and has made numerous recurring and guest appearances including *THE AMERICANS*, *HOUSE OF CARDS*, *TURN*, *ELEMENTARY*, *PERSON OF INTEREST*, *MAJOR CRIMES*, *CHICAGO PD*, *CSI*, and many more. His film credits

include *BLACK KNIGHT*, *THE LOVE LETTER*, and over two dozen indies. Theater credits include the Pulitzer-Prize winning production of *DISGRACED* at LCT3, *THE GOOD NEGRO* at the Public, and Arthur Kopit's *Y2K* and Terrance McNally's *CORPUS CHRISTI* at MTC. His sci-fi graphic novel *THE RECONCILERS* was published in 2010 to wide acclaim.

**LESTER BANGS** was a rock critic who reached iconic status in the 1970s with his passionate, intellectually honest writing in books and publications such as *Rolling Stone*, *Creem*, *The Village Voice*, *Penthouse*, *Playboy* and others. He spent time with and wrote about the 20th century's greatest musicians, including The Clash, Bob Marley, Lou Reed, Paul McCartney, Blondie, Iggy Pop, The Ramones and many more. He was born in Escondido, California on December 14, 1948, and he died in New York City on April 30, 1982.

**THOMAS O. KRIEGSMANN (Associate Producer)** Founder and President of ArKtype, a management and production company specializing in new work development and touring. His past work in the U.S. and abroad includes projects with Brooklyn Academy of Music, Lincoln Center Theater, Jacob's Pillow, New York Theatre Workshop, Market Theatre (Johannesburg), Hartford Stage Company, Barbican Centre, Oxford Playhouse, Noorderzon Festival, Performance Space 122 (Fresh Terrain Festival of Performance Theater, Austin, TX), Berkeley Rep, Center Theatre Group / Mark Taper Forum, Bouffes du Nord and The Kitchen, among many others. His work includes projects with Mikhail Baryshnikov, Peter Brook, Victoria Thiérree-Chaplin, Yael Farber, Annie-B Parson & Paul Lazar, Lisa Peterson, Jay Scheib, Peter Sellars, Julie Taymor, and Tony Taccone. Most recently he served as Director of Programs at New York Live Arts. He recently premiered Big Dance Theater / Mikhail Baryshnikov's *MAN IN A CASE*, the U.S. premiere of Nalaga'at Deaf-Blind Theater's *NOT BY BREAD ALONE*, Andrew Ondrejcek & Shara Worden's *YOU US WE ALL* and *ELIJAH GREEN* w/ John Jasperse. Upcoming premieres include Sam Green & Kronos Quartet's *UNTITLED KRONOS PROJECT*, Byron Au Yong & Aaron Jafferis' *TRIGGER* based in communities nationwide in recognition of the 10th anniversary of the Virginia Tech massacre, Freedom Theatre of Palestine's *THE SIEGE*.

# Rolling Stone

## Lester Bangs Comes to Life Onstage in 'How to Be a Rock Critic'

Inside the Los Angeles play based on the writings of the cantankerous journalism icon



Erik Jensen in 'How to be a Rock Critic.' Craig Schwartz

By Gavin Edwards

June 16, 2015



"A hero is a goddamn stupid thing to have," legendary rock critic Lester Bangs said two weeks ago. Actually, it was actor Erik Jensen, impersonating Bangs — his hero. The setting was a rehearsal room at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in the Culver City neighborhood of Los Angeles, where Jensen and director Jessica Blank were working on the one-man play they wrote about



Bangs (who died in 1982, at age 33), *How to Be a Rock Critic*. On a set depicting Bangs' living room, cluttered with stacks of vinyl records and empty bottles of beer and cough syrup, Jensen brought Bangs back to life, right down to the mustache and the DETROIT SUCKS T-shirt: hectoring, joking, lecturing, fumbling towards a state of grace.

Bangs was a regular contributor to *Rolling Stone* (until he got fired), but probably did his best work for the rival publication *Creem*; he is also remembered as the character played by Philip Seymour Hoffman in *Almost Famous*. His work has been compiled in two books, *Psychotic Reactions* and *Carburetor Dung and Main Lines*, *Blood Feasts*, and *Bad Taste*, volumes that demonstrate why he was considered by many to be America's greatest rock critic: raw, funny, moral, a lover of both noise and beauty, always willing to contradict himself. To put together the play, Jensen and Blank read the entire body of Bangs' work, both published and unpublished, which they estimate at about 15,000 typed pages. "He was a savant and he did a lot of speed," Blank noted.

#### RELATED



### **Cameron Crowe on How Philip Seymour Hoffman Became Lester Bangs**

"I could see Phil was soaking in the mannerisms, the gregarious sharpness of Lester's wit"

"Erik Xeroxed it all." (Then they retyped it all as computer files, a process that took about two years.)

"It was on onionskin paper," Jensen enthused.

"Worms had eaten through some of the paper. You could smell Lester coming out of the box. It was fantastic."

Blank and Jensen interrupt each other with the ease of a married couple, which they are: they wed while working on their award-winning documentary play *The Exonerated*, based on interviews with wrongfully convicted death-row inmates. "This is not documentary theater," Blank said of *How to Be a Rock Critic*. "It's an adaptation — but he wrote in such a personal way, we treated his body of work like one big interview with Lester."

Jensen discovered the work of Bangs at age 10, when his parents were getting divorced and he

was staying with his cousin: "Under his bed, I don't think there was any pornography, but there were these tattered copies of Rolling Stone and Creem. Reading Lester's work, I felt a sense of connection. I could tell that as a writer and an artist and an appreciator of music, he really demanded honesty from people. And in the house I grew up in, honesty was in short supply." So what's it like playing Bangs as an adult? "When I'm living in him, I want to drink as much as I can and eat as much as I can and read as much as I can. It's a mental state of excess."

"There's something so alive and visceral about the language," Blank said. "When I first read Lester's writing, I was like, I have no idea how this is a play, but he's a brilliant writer and a fascinating person."

Even in an early rehearsal where Jensen periodically called for lines, the spirit of Bangs proved to be electrifying. At one point, Jensen stumbled over some dialogue and broke character to complain, "How many verbs are in that sentence?"

Blank, sitting on the lip of the stage with her legs splayed perpendicular, instructed him, "Just do it."

"Yes, darling," Jensen agreed, and then told the production staff, "It's a good thing I'm sleeping with the director."

How to Be a Rock Critic, presented by the Center Theatre Group and South Coast Repertory, opens on June 17th and is scheduled to run through June 28th. The play would probably stand as the most unlikely theatrical adaptation of rock criticism ever, if not for the 1999 production of Greil Marcus' cultural history Lipstick Traces by the Rude Mechanicals of Austin, Texas. "We want the audience to come out of the play having heard music through Lester's ears," Blank said.

After the run-through, Jensen suggested beginning the show by playing side one of Lou Reed's famously unlistenable Metal Machine Music, which provoked some of Bangs' best writing. "Then whoever was left in the theater would be allowed to see the play."

Blank smiled indulgently at her sweaty, mustachioed husband. "I would never allow that to happen."

## Review 'How to Be a Rock Critic': The manic, riveting return of Lester Bangs



Erik Jensen stars as Lester Bangs in "How to Be a Rock Critic" at the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City. (Craig Schwartz)

By **David C. Nichols**

JUNE 22, 2015, 3:49 PM

"Talk amongst yourselves," says a wild-eyed Lester Bangs as he hammers away at his typewriter, gesturing us into his unkempt apartment, Black Sabbath blaring from the turntable. "And nobody touch my records."

So begins "How to Be a Rock Critic," a co-production by South Coast Repertory and Center Theatre Group at the upstairs space of the Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City. Though still finding its structural context, the play is nothing if not a wild and woolly virtual interview with the legendary music writer.

As embodied to his marrow by the formidable Erik Jensen, whose fire-edged turn is



something to see, Bangs is as likely to offer the front row a beer as he is to toss an album across the room even as he's putting it on the turntable.

Co-written by Jensen and his wife, Jessica Blank, who directs the intermissionless proceedings, "Rock Critic" certainly lives up to its subtitle: "Based on the Writings of Lester Bangs." Running from early days in Escondido through his experiences at Rolling Stone and Creem magazines until his demise at age 33, Jensen and Blank's script culls heavily from published reviews and off-the-record statements in an effort to summon its freewheeling, hard-partying subject.

Thus we get Bangs' childhood with a Jehovah's Witness mother who burned up his William S. Burroughs-inspired writings and an alcoholic father who burned up himself. There's the ubiquitous drug use, the profanely eloquent philosophizing and, above all, rock music, which was beyond religion to this particular 20th century iconoclast. And how Jensen portrays him. Shambling about designer Richard Hoover's acridly representative set, shifting from manic to reflective on a hairpin turn, Jensen delivers the aspect and essence of the man, his reenactment of Bangs' famed onstage appearance with the J. Geils Band a riveting comic highlight.

It's a terrific performance in a strong staging -- David Robbins' sound design is especially choice -- and it goes far to offset certain still-jelling perimeters of text and concept. The through line of Bangs' ongoing search for Van Morrison's "Astral Weeks" is a thin connective tissue, and a repetitious quality emerges amid the stream-of-consciousness recountings and poetic realizations.

But just try to look away. "Ultimately," Bangs says, "being a critic means wanting to inflict your taste on other people." This promising solo show absolutely inflicts Bangs' ethos on us.

***"How to Be a Rock Critic,"*** Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City. 8 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday, 1 and 6:30 p.m. Sunday. Ends Sunday. \$30. (213) 628-2772 or [www.centertheatregroup.org](http://www.centertheatregroup.org). Running time: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

## How Do You Possibly Turn Lester Bangs' Rock Criticism Into a Play?

BY FALLING JAMES

FRIDAY, JUNE 19, 2015 AT 5 A.M.



Erick Jensen as Lester Bangs in *How to Be a Rock Critic*

Photo by Craig Schwartz

**Rock & roll has rarely fared well on the theatrical stage.** What makes rock music so exciting — the wild, unrestrained passion and the seemingly limitless possibilities of instinct and volume — usually comes off as contrived and inauthentic in a play. And the idea of presenting a play about a music critic, as Center Theatre Group and South Coast Repertory are doing in their new co-production, would initially appear to be yet another step removed from the real thing. What kind of compelling action could even occur in a play about a rock writer, beyond a lot of frantic, late-night typing?

But the late Lester Bangs was no ordinary rock journalist, and Erik Jensen's one-man tornado of a performance, *How to Be a Rock Critic*, which received its world premiere at Kirk Douglas Theatre on Wednesday night, is no ordinary play.

Escondido native Bangs was a famously unsentimental curmudgeon, whether he was trading wits with Lou Reed ("my hero — fuck that guy") or championing the nobly carnal revolutions of The Troggs and The Stooges, and he likely would have been the first person to decry any attempt to adapt his life to the stage. And yet the manic, hard-partying lifestyle of the profanely poetic Bangs was already a form of theater, and often more interesting than his rock-star subjects'. In an amusing scene, Jensen relives how Bangs once appeared onstage as a guest with The J. Geils Band and ripped out a fiery solo — on his amplified Smith-Corona typewriter, which he then smashed.

Defying expectations, Jensen and his wife, director/co-writer Jessica Blank, manage to structure Bangs' published and unpublished words into a fascinating, insightful story that's often as cathartic and inspiring as the best rock & roll. If anything, Jensen's fervent, nonstop energy exudes more far more honest rock spirit than recent tours by such corporate-minded mercenaries as U2 and The Rolling Stones.

Bangs is briefly seen typing as the audience files into the Douglas Theatre's intimate upstairs space to the sounds of Black Sabbath, but within moments he's handing out fetish mags and cans of Schlitz beer to people in the front rows and restlessly prowling among the haphazard stacks of LPs in his disheveled living room. The set is a jumble of tacky period furniture, ugly brown and orange rugs and scattered cough-syrup bottles that scenic designer Richard Hoover has accurately detailed with vintage albums by Ornette Coleman, The Ramones, Otis Redding and Captain Beefheart.

What passes for plot mainly involves Bangs' desperate search to find in all that clutter his favorite album, Van Morrison's *Astral Weeks*, an almost spiritual interior road trip that encompasses his disillusionment with idols like The Clash and his own guilt as a critic "hovering on the outskirts of their lives."

The use of well-chosen bits of songs by many of these musicians adds crucial resonance to Jensen's performance, just as Bangs' feverish litany of words gives these songs newfound power and a deeper intensity, like a master class in rock rebellion.

**GO!** Kirk Douglas Theatre, 9820 Washington Blvd., Culver City; through Sunday, June 28; \$30. 213-628-2772, [www.centertheatregroup.org](http://www.centertheatregroup.org).



# Pitchfork

## Lester Bangs Subject of New Stage Play "How to Be a Rock Critic"

Written by authors of acclaimed play/film *The Exonerated*



### NEWS

by **Jenn Pelly**  
Associate Reviews Editor

JUNE 5 2014

Pioneering rock critic [Lester Bangs](#) will be the subject of a new, one-man play titled ["How to Be a Rock Critic"](#), as [The New York Times reports](#). It will get its world premiere at [Center Theater Group's Kirk Douglas Theatre](#) in Culver City, Calif., June 17-28, 2015. "How to Be a Rock Critic" was written by Jessica Blank (who also directs) and Erik Jensen (who performs as Bangs). Blank and Jensen are best known for *The Exonerated*, an acclaimed play based on interviews with wrongfully-convicted death row inmates that was turned into a TV movie starring Susan Sarandon, Danny Glover, Brian Dennehy, and more.

Of course, it's not the first time Bangs' life and work have inspired an acting role. Philip Seymour Hoffman's played him in the film *Almost Famous*. ("You cannot make friends with the rock stars.") Bangs wrote for *Rolling Stone*, *The Village Voice*, *Creem*, and more, and was known for his singular, ruthless approach. His writing was collected in 1988's *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* and 2003's *Main Lines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste*. He died in 1982 at the age of 33.

## Rock Critic Lester Bangs Lives On in New One-Man Show

BY CHAZ KANGAS

MONDAY, JUNE 15, 2015 AT 4:30 A.M.



Erik Jensen is Lester Bangs in *How to Be a Rock Critic*

Finnish composer Jean Sibelius once famously quipped, “A statue has never been erected in honor of a critic.” While that may be true, a beloved critical voice is about to get his artistic due onstage. *How to Be a Rock Critic*, a one-man show about legendary and highly influential rock writer Lester Bangs, opens June 17 at the

Kirk Douglas Theatre in Culver City At a time when the foundations of music criticism were begging to be shaken up, Bangs' fearless fury tore down the ideas of celebrity worship and brought a personal, gonzo approach the world of rock journalism on the cusp of the punk movement. After a career writing for *Creem*, *Rolling Stone*, *Village Voice* and *Playboy*, Bangs died of an accidental overdose in New York City in 1982 at age 33.

The fervent energy of Bangs returns to this mortal coil in the form of *How to Be a Rock Critic's* star and co-writer Erik Jensen, who wrote the play with his wife and the play's director, Jessica Blank. Creating the show was a seven-year process from inception to stage, but Jensen's love of Bangs' work goes back even further.

"My parents were getting divorced," Jensen says, "and I got sent to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to my cousin Greg's house while they got the legal rigmarole out of the way. My cousin was a fan of The Clash, he had a weird thing called an 'electric guitar,' which I had never seen before, and under his bed were not the typical magazines you'd find under a teenager's bed. He actually had copies of *Rolling Stone* and *Creem* going back eight or nine years. So it was there that I first encountered Lester."

Jensen and Blank have created other docu-theater shows, such as *The Exonerated*, a play based on their interviews with 40 wrongfully convicted death row inmates. But *How to Be a Rock Critic* doesn't fall under the same umbrella, because their deceased subject couldn't be interviewed. Instead, the play is culled from the couple's extensive research, both from speaking with Bangs' estate as well as getting access to all 15,000 pages of Bangs' archives. This included Bangs' 15-page resignation letter to the publisher of *Creem*, which began, "Dear Barry, do you think about me when you're fucking your wife? Because that's how much I think about this magazine."

"One of the problems was Lester was very self-involved," Jensen explains. "He was a chronic solipsist. We know [from] Lester's friends that he was a fury of opposites. How do we get people to want to spend time with this guy? And we honed in on this being symbolically the last night of Lester's life and he's doing his 'Gospel According to Lester.'"

"What we had to do," Blank adds, "was find out where the manifesto-ness of his work was coming from. What was motivating that sort of devotion and passion? He wasn't a close-minded guy — he was completely passionate in what he believed but was totally willing to be proven wrong. He was a utopian. He was a total punk-rock, jaded cynic [and] at the same time he was almost impossibly hopeful, looking for pure authenticity in music. His bottom line was, is it truthful?"

It's an interesting coincidence that *How to Be a Rock Critic* is opening a week after the death of jazz great Ornette Coleman, whom Bangs considered a huge early influence and staunchly defended at a time when most rock critics were dubious of jazz. Although



today's pop culture media have no shortage of voices allegedly "speaking their mind," especially on the Internet, Blank and Jensen's revisiting of Bangs shows how ahead of the curve he truly was.

"The weird thing about Lester's work for me as a kid," Jensen says, "which still resonates with me now, is the brutal kind of moralistic honesty. In an age where we're all trying to come to some agreement on what we think is cool or good or bad on the Internet, there's some kind of impulse [for] the tyranny of the majority to jump on alternative opinions. In that light, Lester was really groundbreaking. When I was a kid, honesty was something in short supply in my life. I think we need Lester now more than ever."

But while they both have become intimately familiar with Bangs' writings, that doesn't mean they agree with all of his opinions. "At a base level, I think Lester was wrong about the first Black Sabbath album," Jensen says. He also believes that "the first two Grateful Dead albums have a lot more to do with garage rock and surf rock than Lester [thought]."

"You guys can argue about the Grateful Dead in heaven," Blank tells him.

*How to Be a Rock Critic runs June 17-28 at the Kirk Douglas Theatre. [Tickets and more info.](#)*

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