



PHOTO BY KATE SZROM

BLITZEN TRAPPER

ROCK CONCERT MEETS THEATER

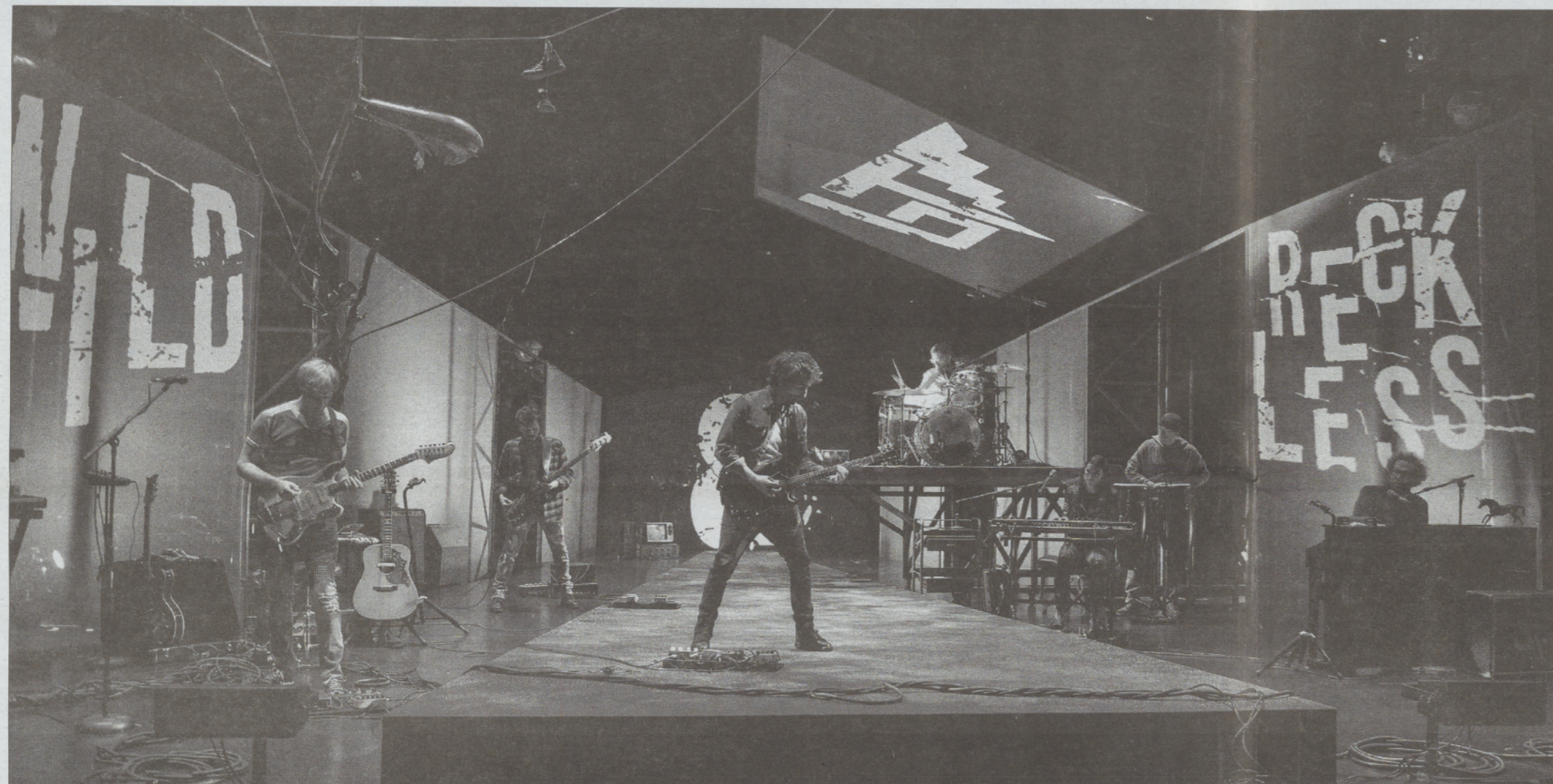


PHOTO BY PATRICK WEISHAMPEL/BLANKKEYE.TV

Top: Blitzen Trapper members (from left) Michael Van Pell, Marty Marquis, Eric Earley, Brian Adrian Koch and Erik Menteer.

Above: Blitzen Trapper performs "Wild and Reckless."

"It will feel like a concert with a narrative thread."

LIAM KAAS-LENTZ,
CO-DIRECTOR OF
"WILD AND RECKLESS"

BY JASON COHEN
STAFF WRITER

Since releasing its eighth record, "All Across This Land," in October 2015, Blitzen Trapper has played three Portland shows: one in Pioneer Square and two at Revolution Hall. This March and April, they'll play 28 – all at Portland Center Stage at The Armory.

The hard-touring, five-piece, Portland-based band is used to playing in lots of gigs, in lots of different settings. The Pioneer Square appearance was a free concert for Widmer's "Hefe Day," in front of a crowd that was mostly interested in beer and that afternoon's Timbers game. The return visit to Revolution Hall was the final night of the band's semi-acoustic "Songbook: A Night of Stories and Songs" tour, which skewed toward cover songs (ranging from Townes Van Zandt to Smashing Pumpkins), and found the band's

normally laconic frontman, Eric Earley, sharing youthful memories and tales of rock 'n' roll inspiration. In between, Blitzen Trapper fans could find the group everywhere from a Milwaukee coffee roaster to a Montana ski resort to the upscale City Winery venues in Chicago, Nashville and New York. That's what it takes to be a viable working band in the age of mobile phones and music streaming.

"You're basically a trucker," Earley said. "I like to think of it as performative furniture moving," added Brian Adrian Koch, the band's drummer.

But not for the next five weeks. During that time, Blitzen Trapper will never have to leave the Pearl District – and Koch's drum kit will slide on and off the stage atop a riser, almost like magic. Such are the perks that theater offers over rock 'n' roll. Because if the location of the 28 gigs didn't already give it away, the band is up to something very different, and unlike anything it – or Portland Center Stage – has

ever done before. It's a show called "Wild and Reckless: A New Concert Event With Blitzen Trapper," starring the five members of the band, as well as actors Laura Carbonell and Leif Norby.

Commissioned by PCS as part of its "Northwest Stories" series (which has also included the plays "Oregon Trail" and "Astoria") and co-directed by Rose Riordan and Liam Kaas-Lentz, "Wild and Reckless" is – well, nobody is 100 percent sure what it is, really. The first fliers around town billed it as a "musical event with Blitzen Trapper," but even that may have led PCS subscribers to expect something along the lines of a twangy "Hamilton," leading to the "concert" substitution.

"It's not a musical," said Riordan, and that's probably a good thing. Rock 'n' roll musical theater usually fails to be one or the other. "Wild and Reckless" doesn't try solve this problem, and also sidesteps the eternal musical riddle of "why are these characters breaking into song?" It's a Blitzen Trapper

show in which the band performs a bunch of new songs. It also has characters and an impressionistic, loosely structured story.

"The big thing about this play – this event – is the sense of time that the audience will experience is a little different," Kaas-Lentz said. "In a concert, you start a song, and then you sit in the song, and then you get to the end of the song, and you continue with the concert. Whereas in a musical, the plot drives into a song, and the song then drives the plot to the next point. Back to the plot, drive the plot, start another song; that song drives the plot."

But with "Wild and Reckless," he said, "It will feel like a concert with a narrative thread."

The show's title makes it a sound a bit more rustic than its story really is. Oregon's natural beauty is part of its world, but so is the state's history of exploiting all that beauty. It's also set in the future, albeit, kind of an alternate-reality version of the future based on Portland's past – the late '90s and

IF YOU GO

"Wild and Reckless" opens at The Armory at Portland Center Stage on Friday, March 24, and runs through April 30. Tickets are \$25-\$55, with discounts for students/youth (\$30) and, via the "Arts For All" program, SNAP/Oregon Trail participants (\$5).

early oughts, formative years for both the city and the band. Earley's songs and storytelling in the show touch on addiction and what he calls "Old Portland," offering something of a chronological bridge between "Drugstore Cowboy" and "Portlandia," with an extra dose of Williams S. Burroughs and a little bit of Edward Abbey.

Those latter influences suggest themselves because, as you might expect of any self-respecting artistic vision of the future – particularly when that vision also includes elements of prog-rock – the Portland of "Wild and Reckless" is dystopian.

The conceit of the show is that, sometime in the future, lightning has been harnessed to generate power: the latest chapter in mankind's tendency to, as one character puts it, "tame the Earthly forces one by one, to our own short-sighted ends." But there's also an addictive byproduct from the "reapers" that harvest all the energy. Users of this "dust" are not only unable to kick (the "works" looks like a cross between a camping torch and a crack pipe), but are also prone to being struck by lightning, which, if they survive, leaves them with permanent, root-like burn scars.

As Earley put it, "What are the symptoms of a society that seeks nothing but power, in all its forms?" The metaphor's not subtle, but when it's fueled by loud guitars and Muscle Shoals grooves, it doesn't have to be. And underneath this sci-fi frame is a much simpler and largely autobiographical story: Small-town boy moves to the city (four of the five members of Blitzen Trapper are from Salem). Boy (Earley's character is simply called "The Narrator") meets Girl (Carbonell's character is, in fact, "The Girl"). They fall in love, and she becomes his muse, but she is also on the "dust." Eventually they end up on the road, and then ...

"I don't know how much of the story I'm supposed to (give away)," Earley said.

Fair enough. But, to borrow from Chekhov's famous theatrical truism, if you put a powerfully addictive narcotic in Act 1 of your play ...

In a practical sense, Blitzen Trapper fans have Lauren Weedman to thank for the

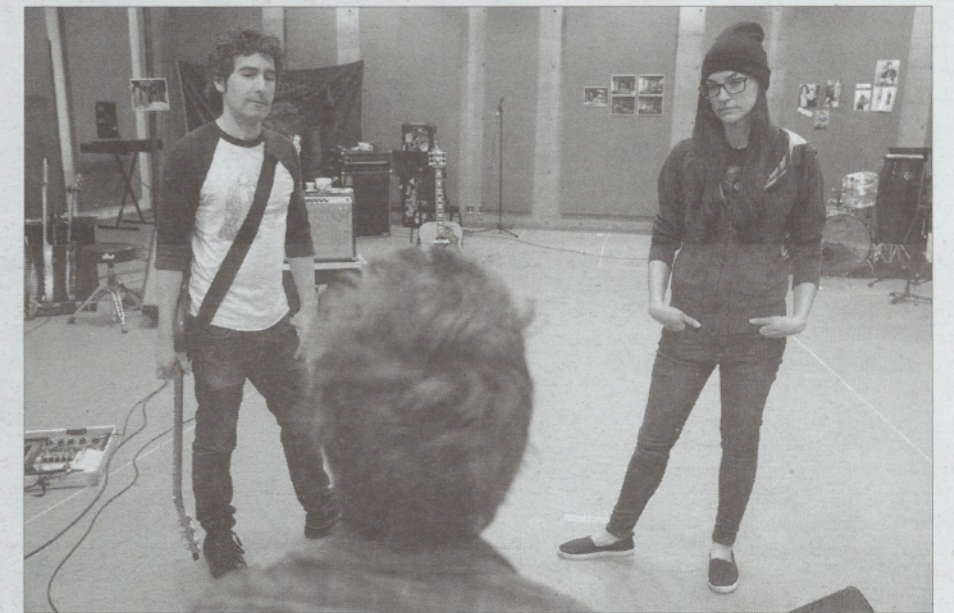


PHOTO BY KATE SZROM

Eric Earley and Laura Carbonell rehearse "Wild and Reckless" by Blitzen Trapper.



PHOTO BY KATE SZROM

Costume Designer Alison Heryer.

existence of "Wild and Reckless." The writer, actress and PCS favorite ("BUST, The People's Republic of Portland") is also back in town this month with a new one-woman musical, "Lauren Weedman Doesn't Live Here Anymore." But because it is a solo show, and Weedman lives in Los Angeles and has a school-age child, there was no way she could perform on the Armory's big stage eight times a week. So the theater needed something to put on in repertory.

Enter Kaas-Lentz, who is also PCS's production manager.

"He said, 'I know a guy,'" said Riordan, the theater's associate artistic director.

That guy was Kaas-Lentz's fellow Portland State alumnus Koch, who, when he's not behind the drums, is a theater person in his own right. Koch best known to Portland audiences as the writer, director and star of a live adaptation of the B-movie – and "Mystery Science Theater 3000" target – "Manos: The Hands of Fate," and has also been in nearly all the recent Portland-shot TV, including "Portlandia" (way back in Season 1), "Grimm" and "The Librarians."

Kaas-Lentz asked Koch if the band was sitting on a narrative piece, and Earley sort of was. He'd already been writing Blitzen Trapper's ninth album, with a storyline about the star-crossed lovers that was based on his own life. Earley also writes (as-yet-unpublished) fiction, including a novel he described as "a huge blown-out work about heroin addiction, robotic science and Old Portland." That and the music for the album were enough to reverse-engineer a theater piece, which the band workshoped last summer at PCS's JAW Festival (the acronym stands for "just add water"), kicking off a long process of collaboration among Earley, the band, and Riordan and Kaas-Lentz. The album, also expected to be titled "Wild and Reckless," is due out later in the year, though PCS will be selling a limited-edition sampler at the performances.

Some of Earley's songs from the album went into the show as is. Some got tweaked with new lyrics, and some were written expressly for the show. The show also

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