

culture

TOTALLY LEGAL SUBSTANCE

Mars Bard

Playwright Jay Scheib is on a mission to bring planet Mars into the limelight, with a new stage show.

"I love science fiction," says playwright and MIT professor Jay Scheib, 38. "But when it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up." Example: A group of rogue scientists are planning to inhabit the planet in the next 10 years, but flying there would most likely be a one-way suicide mission. "The fact that there are people willing to give their lives to get to Mars is shocking," says Jay, who first heard about the mission through a few of his drama

and math university in Cambridge, Mass. For one thing, he teaches in the music and theater arts program, introducing otherwise stage-shy engineers to the basics of acting. He also doesn't look like a typical academic. Sitting in the downtown performance space P.S. 122, where *Untitled Mars* debuts on Tuesday, Jay appears more British rocker (à la Jarvis Cocker) than tweedy professor. In his lean pinstripe pants, black blazer and dark wool scarf, he is not at all out of place in the experimental East

P.S. 122.) His usual focus is on opera and Greek drama, but this month he has been devoted to the red planet, rehearsing inside an abandoned Wall Street bank vault ("It's so weird," he says. "There are still employee memos on the wall from 2001") and readying the set at P.S. 122. "We are painting the theater completely white," he says. "I want it to look like a cross between a space station on Mars and a science lab on Earth."

The play tells the story of a seven-person team that lands on Mars and must adapt to a new planet—and its bitter-cold, jail-cell conditions—or die. Throughout the play, Jay interrupts the onstage action to interview (via live video feed) real aeronautics students and their mentors at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah. His questions about their research lends the show the aura of a real-world science documentary.

Trekkies, rejoice: *Untitled Mars* is the first in a trilogy of space-age plays, called *Simulated Cities/Simulated Systems*, that Jay plans to complete over the coming years. After this show closes in New York, however, Jay is off to the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis to stage a new opera based on the works of Gertrude Stein. Still, the busy professor is happy to have embraced science in his writing: "I work inside the culture of nerd at MIT," he explains. "I took the time to listen to what my students were talking about, and I was hooked. Now I really want to bring the science into arts and sciences." —Rachel Syme

Untitled Mars (This Title May Change) will run Apr. 8–27 at P.S. 122 (150 First Ave., at Ninth St.).



Footage of aeronautics students at the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah is interwoven within Jay's play.

students. "I immediately felt inspired to write something."

Despite the justifiably nerdy subject of the resulting work, *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*, Jay is as far from a geek as one could imagine—especially for a professor at MIT, the famed science

Village theater.

Jay divides his time between Massachusetts and New York, where he keeps an apartment on the Lower East Side, under the Williamsburg Bridge. (Coincidentally, he met his fiancée, a writer and actress, at a November 2006 show at

A man with curly brown hair, wearing a black long-sleeved button-down shirt and black pants, stands in a locker room. He is holding a pair of glasses in his right hand. The background consists of blue metal lockers, some with the number '15' visible. A bright red plastic chair with a metal frame is positioned to the right of the man. The lighting is dramatic, with strong shadows.

“When it comes to Mars, the actual facts are weirder than anyone could make up.”

Life on Mars: Professor and playwright Jay Scheib is bringing science into arts and sciences.



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Time Out New York / Issue 655 : Apr 16-22, 2008

Martian to a different drummer

Multimedia wizard Jay Scheib colonizes the Red Planet for theatrical research.

By Helen Shaw



MISSION CONTROL Scheib probes a strange planet. Photograph: Guy De Carufel

Deep in the belly of an abandoned vault on Wall Street, a man with a lizard tail talks softly to his foam claws as another stages an aggressive seduction in a boardroom. An almost whisper-soft suggestion—"Could you try that a little more tenderly?"—comes from the lanky director crouching at the lovers' feet. Even though embraces in Jay Scheib's shows usually look like wrestling holds, the note persuades actor Caleb Hammond to grip his paramour slightly less viciously—as he half-nelsons her into a revolving chair. The lizard picks up a camera.

Welcome to Mars. Or at least, welcome to a rehearsal of **Untitled Mars: This Title May Change**, a droll, discombobulating trip to the Red Planet as dreamed up by Scheib. An unlikely collision of scientific experiment and Philip K. Dick, the show takes its inspiration from one of the Mars Desert Research Stations, a deadly serious outpost where researchers wear space suits and run around the Utah desert. While the scientists simulate life on Mars, Scheib's company will simulate the scientists—though with a significantly lower budget. Set designer Peter Ksander describes the mash-up of sci-fi and reality as the new alienation effect: "Jay is using Mars in the same way that Brecht used the Thirty Years War." It's not *that* alien: The 38-year-old director lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts and teaches at MIT, where some of his students might actually have a crack at being Mars pioneers.

As with almost all of Scheib's work, the show will be thick with video, much of it shot live in the room. He may not want to become a one-trick pony ("I have an *Iphigenia* coming up that has no video at all!" he assures us. "Maybe three light cues!"), but Scheib is still known for his multimedia work. Video appears in most of his shows, its function changing to create phantoms (*The Vomit Talk of Ghosts*), a sensation of surveillance (*This Is the End of Sleeping*) or a self-consciously cinematic composition (the Godard-inflected *This Place Is a Desert*). But the director claims there is a constant. "It all stems from trying to work on naturalism," he explains. "I wanted to take up the game that all my incredibly cool teachers—Robert Woodruff and Anne Bogart—had said was dead. It was my rebellion."

The resulting works, exquisitely designed with the lackadaisical rhythms of everyday speech, look totally unlike the rest of the New York avant-garde, though they ring bells with theater buffs in Germany and France. "I am synthesizing techniques that already exist," Scheib readily admits. "It's just that in Europe, the Wooster Group isn't on the fringes—they've been folded into the mainstream."

Not everybody is a fan. Scheib's dedication to observing human behavior forces theatrical time to slow to something like real time, and the pace downshift can leave viewers impatient and disoriented. (Tip: Pretend you're in a gallery watching an installation.) And while theater has been incorporating projection for decades, audiences still rankle at how the video steals focus. Says



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Another major director who gigs too rarely in New York, Woodruff taught Scheib, but now sees him as a colleague. "It's great that he found a home at MIT," Woodruff says. "He can fly off to Europe, but he still has a place to do his research. If you find another setup like that—please tell me first." The struggle for funding is just another reason to make *Untitled Mars*. "You should go to these space-vision conferences," Scheib says with a chuckle. "That community sounds just like a theater conference—it's always about the lack of funding. It's very rarely about art."

Untitled Mars: This Title May Change is at P.S. 122.

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Time Out New York / Issue 655 : Apr 16-22, 2008

Untitled Mars: This Title May Change

P.S. 122. Conceived and directed by Jay Scheib. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins. No intermission.



SPACE ODDITY Sweeney, right, encounters an astronaut. Photograph: Justin Bernhaut

Director Jay Scheib doesn't look like a geek. With his art-school specs, tousled hair and stylish attire, this laid-back orchestrator of multimedia installations surrounds himself with strikingly attractive actors and sexy technology. Yet scratch the surface and under the hipster auteur you might find a chubby nerd building a spaceship out of tin foil and cardboard in the garage. Now, Scheib and his dedicated actor-technicians have graduated to fancier materials with *Untitled Mars: This Title May Change*, a docu-video-performance piece that merges speculative science and avant-garde theatrics.

The elaborate, multizoned playing space created by Peter Ksander (the most ingenious set designer working downtown) is a re-creation of the Mars Desert Research Station in Utah—itself a simulation of the Martian landscape, where scientists hope we'll establish a colony. The plot (related in elliptical fragments) is a crude pastep of soap-opera seductions and sci-fi pulp, featuring a real-estate villain (Caleb Hammond), a heroic repair woman (Tanya Selvaratnam) and a scientist (April Sweeney) who may have found a link between schizophrenia and clairvoyance. Oh, and there's a guy in green makeup with a giant lizard tail.

Using live video feeds and editing software to create the illusion of walking on the Martian surface, Scheib masterfully blends high-tech effects with his performers, who wrestle and simulate sex with gusto. (He himself appears, quizzing real scientists about space exploration via Skype linkup.) Even though the message—wherever we humans go, we'll bring our problems—is old as Ray Bradbury, at least the vehicle is super space age. (See also "Martian to a different drummer," page 161.)

—David Cote



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Sightlines

Untitled Mars: Lost in Space

Jay Schleib's beguiling, perplexing trip to the red planet

by Alexis Soloski

April 15th, 2008 12:00 AM

"Is there any life on Mars?" David Bowie and various scientists have long inquired.

Writer-director-performer Jay Scheib doesn't answer their query, but he does provide a lively look at the attempt to populate the red planet in *Untitled Mars (This Title May Change)*. In collaboration with MIT scientists at the Mars Desert Research Station (MDRS) and members of Budapest's Pont Mühely theater company, Scheib heads a theatrical mission to that far-off sphere.

The script is utterly jumbled—a fusion of Dr. Robert Zubrin's scholarly treatise *The Case for Mars*, Philip K. Dick's science-fiction *Martian Time-Slip*, live video conferencing with a tart-tongued aerospace grad student, as well as footage and transcripts from MDRS. The play primarily discusses the potential of a one-way mission to Mars. But it also includes romantic relationships, sinister experiments, and dodgy real-estate deals.

With three video screens, various computer monitors, and three separate stage environments, the plot isn't the only perplexing element. Often, the eye doesn't know where to settle. Yet what a pleasure to encounter an artist like Scheib, with so many ideas and so many means of presenting them. And if the narrative rather baffles, the visual images—in all their plenitude—are arresting, as are the attractive actors. In a video clip, Dr. Zubrin insists: "We have to go to Mars simply because it's there." If Scheib's leading, we just might go along for the ride.