

# Pass the Roach

**A downtown cockroach and a nihilistic alley cat light up the gutters in the Theater Gallery's *Archy and Mehitabel***

by [Max Sparber](#)

...The Theater Gallery is akin to the eccentric movement theater of the Twin Cities, reminiscent of the earliest and scrappiest works of the Theatre de la Jeune Lune--and it's no wonder, as the company's co-founder, Paul Herwig, is Jacques LeCoq-trained, like the founders of Jeune Lune. Four of the cast members for *Archy*, in the meanwhile, have connections to the Margolis Brown Co.--more local movement theater. And the two remaining cast members have long backgrounds in dance: One regularly performs with the No Pants Dancers at the Scrimshaw Brothers' monthly cabaret/variety show. So perhaps we should not be surprised that this production includes a dreamlike street scene in which cockroaches duel each other with tap shoes and a praying mantis prostitutes herself, snapping the heads off her johns after they hand her rumpled ten-dollar bills.

*Archy and Mehitabel* is based on the jazz-age writings of Don Marquis, who penned a series of short stories about a free-verse-spewing cockroach and a down-on-her-luck alley cat who is convinced that she is the reincarnation of Cleopatra. Marquis's writings are suffused with an alarming sadness. The insects and feral animals that pass through Archy and Mehitabel's world lead short, violent lives punctuated by brief glimpses of ecstatic beauty, and the Theater Gallery's production does an excellent job translating this mood to the stage. Archy, played by Herwig in a battered hobo's coat painted to look like an insect's carapace, ruminates angrily on the sorry lot of insects like him, while Mehitabel (played by Kym Longhi) wanders away from a litter of new kittens, leaving them in an upright garbage can in the hopes that it will rain and her needy, mewling offspring will drown. A collection of transient cockroaches provide the play with its chorus, costuming themselves to take the part of each new character in the script. When Archy visits a cabaret in Europe, they go so far as to deck themselves out in bondage collars and National Socialist brown shirts, dancing salaciously and reading dadaist manifestoes from the likes of Hans Arp. Groaning art-song instrumentation by local composer Marc Doty provides the scene's discordant accompaniment.

Archy, applauding wildly, watches this cockroach cabaret while seated on the floor in front of the audience. At the same time, the cockroach chorus sets up stonily silent cardboard cutouts of additional audience members alongside him. The moment provided, briefly, a sad little metaphor for a cold Sunday of theater. *Archy and Mehitabel* is a marvelous work, and deserves the vigorous applause Archy provided it. But with my mood still darkened by skittish news from New York, I found it hard to muster such enthusiasm. Me, I was among the cardboard cutouts.



Kafka didn't know the half of it: The sentient cockroach Archy (Paul Herwig) and friends in *Archy and Mehitabel*