

Sticking It to Taboos

BY JONAS MOODY PHOTO BY PÁLL STEFÁNSSON DRAWINGS BY HUGLEIKUR DAGSSON

Inspired by bathroom humor, cartoonist and playwright Hugleikur Dagsson enlists a troupe of ill-fated stick figures to enact scenes of incest, rape and murder. The prolific 29 year old has released seven books in Iceland, catching the eye of publishing giants Penguin and HarperCollins and scoring him two book deals in the overseas market. Though his shock tactics tend to horrify, you'll have to lighten up and listen closely because Dagsson actually has something serious to say.

Jonas Moody: Tell me about the birth of your first stick figure.

Hugleikur Dagsson: A bunch of art students participated in a project, and I did watercolors of sharks eating people and exploding planes, but it wasn't enough. There was half an hour until the show, so I drew two little stick figures and one of them says, 'Fuck me.' Then I turned the paper over to draw something serious, but just drew another stick figure joke. Everyone who draws uses stick figures once in a while because the joy works quicker. It downloads faster into your brain.

JM: What truths are you pointing to with your satire?

HD: The obvious truth is that nothing is as it seems, that horrible things happen next door. It's not specific to Iceland, but when you hear about murder, incest and rape here it does seem to be more horrible because *everything* is next door. Knowing that kind of horror happens here has inspired me to do little stories about it. Maybe it's even how I deal with it.

JM: The titles of your books follow a pattern: *Love Us, Kill Us, Fuck Us, Save Us*, etc. Who is 'Us'?

HD: It's humanity, how humans surprise us with how horrible they can be. Specifically, the truth that has stuck with me through these books is that families, which are meant to be comforting and beautiful, often turn into something horrible. I have a rather moralistic view, but at the same time I'm being sarcastic. But it's those two that mix up so well: morality and sarcasm.

JM: What sort of reactions have you gotten? Any bricks through your window?

HD: One priest protested against an ad of a priest confessing that he beat up his daughter. However, there was a group of priests who came to see my musical, *Uterus*, and they laughed especially hard at the bible jokes. The strongest reaction I've gotten is a headline from the *Irish Sun*: "Ban This Sick Book." It was actually the best advertisement the book could get. It'll probably be a quote on the cover of my next book. My mom says that people in Iceland wouldn't dare to criticize the book because they would be branded as people who don't understand the humor and sarcasm.

JM: Does your own family ever show up in your work?

HD: They actually influenced me a lot, but I didn't realize it until recently. My dad, the theologian, got me interested in all the crazy religions like the Greek and the Norse gods, which got me into comics, which has taken me where I am now. My mom and her friends started an amateur theater group, so I spent a lot of my childhood drawing

on the floor while she was nearby writing a play. So subconsciously I learned how to write plays. I never thought I would follow in her footsteps, but I did.

JM: Your plays have won you acclaim in Iceland, including Playwright of the Year in 2006 for *Avoid Us*, and a long run for your current sci-fi musical, *Uterus*. How did the comics translate into plays?

HD: *Uterus* started as a one-page comic about a girl who gets pregnant and doesn't know what to do with it. She meets a doctor, who gets in a shrinking machine and goes inside her to fight the fetus like in a video game. When I decided to make it into a science-fiction musical, I wrote a story alongside it about the big news story at the time, the debate over the Kárahnjúkar industrial project. That's what Iceland was thinking about then, so it came into the musical through me: what the future of Iceland would look like if things went towards heavy industry.

JM: I was surprised to see that your playhouse crowd is primarily middle-aged women happy to get their teenage sons to the theater. So besides bringing these warring tribes together, what do you want to do with your stage work?

HD: Things are at a crossroads now. I got a grant from the Icelandic Film Fund to make *Avoid Us* into a film with Blue Eyes, Baltasar Kormákur's production company. That's still in the early stages, but I'll finish the script this summer.

JM: What do you think about children seeing your work? Would you put the cartoons in front of your own kid?

HD: No. Maybe when my kid is older. When the books first came out I had parents come up to me saying, "I have an eight-year-old who loves your books," and I'm thinking, "Have *you* read my books?" In the end if parents trust their children to read them, then kids will see that these are stick figures, not how-to books.

JM: But your stage work brings these atrocities to life in flesh and blood. What sort of response does that elicit as opposed to the cartoons?

HD: There is a line there. There was one scene in *Avoid Us* where a father is fondling his daughter while she is watching *Friends*. It's the most difficult moment in the play. It comes right after people have been laughing hard, and nobody laughs all of a sudden. And they're not supposed to. There's the question: should you be laughing at this? Although I'm writing humor, I have something serious to say. Sometimes I even make myself uncomfortable. That's how I know it's working.

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