LIVE in New York City
Puppetry Performed in Unconventional Spaces
By Cheryl Henson

Parking Lot

The first live puppet theater I saw this fall took place in the parking lot of the Clemente Soto Vélez Cultural Center on the Lower East Side. As part of a series of fundraising events for Dixon Place, Founding Director Ellie Covan presented three puppet pieces in different spaces around the lot. As we entered, Maria Camia and Leah Osawa performed hand puppets from New Mory, a show that was originally scheduled to open at Dixon Place this fall. Playing under the watchful eye of a painted mural, these characters happily engaged in a colorful love story. Next, in another part of the lot, Patti Bedshaw performed an elegant dance with two large paper flowers taken from a larger piece called Flowers in Space, in which she portrays Marcel Duchamp. Patti, a dancer and choreographer known for articulated gestures with objects, brought the flowers alive for us, illustrating Duchamp’s appreciation of their beauty. The third puppet performance came from Justin Perkins, who created a delightful new piece just for the benefit called A Dance About the End of the World. In a wonderful combination of body and object movement, Justin used simple paper cutouts to transform himself into an ever-morphing creature with multiple moving eyes. Eyes emerged on his feet and then moved to his hands and back. A mouth eats. A tear is shed. Justin’s sense of character, movement, and humor was a delight. Although the audience was by necessity a small one, less than 20 people, we were grateful to see the afternoon’s variety of playful puppetry, excellent musical artists, as well as its welcoming host, Nancy Giles, whose singing and storytelling added to the afternoon’s uplifting effect. This was to have been Ellie’s “Year of the Puppet” at Dixon Place, including five puppet premieres. With the season cancelled, it was exciting to see puppetry so beautifully represented in the Dixon Place fundraiser.

West Village Streets

The next live performance I saw took place mainly in the streets of the West Village and ended in a church balcony, transformed into the art studio of the remarkable French artist Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. The show featured puppets by James Ortiz. Entitled Voyeur: The Windows of Toulouse-Lautrec and produced by Bated Breath Theatre Company, the piece reenacts moments in the life of the famous artist in the dream-like setting of the busy nighttime sidewalks around Christopher Street and Sheridan Square, with specific locations chosen for their resemblance to 19th century Paris. An intimate audience of eight is guided by actors who move and dance in character. The ambience was greatly enhanced by a live violinist and recorded music coming from one guide’s wind-up Hardy-gurdy. Lighting attached to objects that the performers carried added to the sense of theater. We are introduced to Lautrec as he is played poignantly past his prime by Ortiz’s puppet. The story begins in the windows of a house in Paris’s red-light district, where Lautrec has not paid his bill. The story moves down the street to the passionate relationship between Lautrec’s parents, who were cousins. Next, we witness Lautrec’s closeness to his mother, represented in a scene played out in shadows within an eight-foot version of his mother’s skirt. During the evening, we learn of Lautrec’s physical struggles due to genetic inbreeding, his syphilis, and his addiction to absinthe. But more importantly, we come to better appreciate the beauty with which he bears witness to the variety of sexuality in his world. The story ends in the balcony of Judson Church, just south of Washington Square Park. We watch an extraordinary solo dancer perform in the main space below the balcony as Lautrec looks upon the dancer and captures his/her inner turmoil and resistance to a prescribed life. The night that we saw the show, dozens of police vehicles were lined up on the block in front of the church, readying for possible protests the week of the election. The officers watched as we walked by, carrying battery-operated candles into the church for the ritual of memory.

Times Square Store

The third piece I saw was The Plastic Bag Store: A Tragicomic Ode to the Foreshore of Plastic by Robin Frohardt, produced by Times Square Arts, and set in a previously empty store in Times Square. Frohardt packed the store’s shelves with objects that resemble everyday products for sale but are made of recycled plastic bags and bottles, creating an immersive, thought-provoking art installation. The story continued on next page.
Fly Away
A REVIEW
By Diéry Prudent

In Fly Away, the puppetry performance that brings to life Derek Fordjour’s contemporary art show, Self Must Die, at Petzel Gallery in Manhattan, a Black “Everyman” puppet arrives on stage in a plain pine box, borne on the shoulders of four black-clad, white-skinned puppeteers. Their dark suits and pall-bearers’ posture suggest a child’s coffin, but a soundtrack of waves lapping the shore—and the puppeteers’ ebb-and-flow movements before bringing the box to rest—conjure a slave ship.

So begins a narrative tour-de-force in which this gorgeously rendered, charismatic puppet undergoes a series of trials at the hands of his white handlers in this parable about Black life in America. For me, a 58-year-old Black New Yorker, many of the story’s vignettes cut to the bone.

The tale unfolds in a built-to-scale puppet theater nestled in the middle of a pandemic-era art opening showing Fordjour’s contemporary show in its entirety—a rare feat amid the ongoing crisis of the pandemic.

Puppetry has a certain magic that happens only when it is experienced live. There are intrepid artists throughout the country finding ways to perform live theater in unconventional spaces. There are also artists finding ways to continue working on shows that will be ready once theaters are able to open again.

So as we savor this performance, we can only imagine what more will be on the horizon for puppeteers and audiences alike in the future.