



BREAD & PUPPET THEATER  
OF  
GLOVER, VERMONT, USA

*Features Drama Editor JOHN SULLIVAN writes...*

The Apocalypse Defiance Circus Comes to Houston

On November 22 of last year, The Bread & Puppet Theater of Glover Vermont / USA visited Houston Texas, performing their “Apocalypse Refusal Circus” in a semi-enclosed, former warehouse space now called The Orange Show. It’s impossible for me (at least) to condense that experience into a few glib statements about devised political theatre, &/or agitprop but I can say this entirely unique traveling company evoked a wicked / strong “solidarity response” from their widely diverse Texas audience and I need to mention a few of the reasons why Bread & Puppet deserves a close look, and a barrage of applause.

#### Some Observations & Thoughts About the Company:

#1 – Bread & Puppet redefines the concept of a hybridized mixed bag as it combines unscripted / devised theatre practice with Vaudeville, Commedia, applied educational theatre techniques, image theatre, political discourse, and even certain elements of British Panto into one huge / unruly / steaming alloy of humor, sincerity, rage and resistance. The impacts are undeniable and the through-line coheres though it’s often just on the verge of catastrophe: like poking a proverbial hornet’s nest (of ideas and feelings) until it pops, or dumping a sizeable chunk of sodium into a basin of water. The only certainties are: there will be fireworks and laughter, political conservatives (and some moderates) may be appalled, and heart-rates will be higher than normal.

#2 – They call themselves Possibilitarians. In the face of all the dire, some of them positively existential, issues they confront in life and performance, they refuse to submit to fear, deliberate “ignor/ance”, denial, or hatred of any ideological adversaries. They offer, instead, a performance infused with joy and hope, and the prospects of collaboration, of extending their network of solidarity to every community they can physically reach. Their cast for the Houston performance featured a number of local dancers, theatre-makers and musicians. Some of this was by design, but there were more locals than usual because COVID had temporarily depleted their own ranks.

#3 – Revisiting that idea of life and performance, it’s obvious that Bread & Puppet actors – for however long they’re part of the company – embody an ideal that melds life and art and social commitment. They travel together, some of them in a huge school bus that also serves as a backdrop and a staging area for actors, puppets and props. Wherever they perform, they eat with that community, shelter in that community, and these communities serve as platforms to broadcast the news of what they’re doing, and why.

#4 – Bread & Puppet operates on the principles of co-founder Peter Schumann’s “Cheap Art Manifesto”. They believe that art should ideally be free, or at least very cheap, and accessible to everyone regardless of finances. In Schumann’s own words: “Art should be open, engaged, free and available to all. It is not a business or a privilege of the rich.” Their DIY aesthetic and lack of tour amenities is an emblem of that commitment. The Orange Show sponsor did sell tickets to their performance in Houston – crowd insurance and security do cost money – but to the best of my knowledge, people who couldn’t pay were not turned away. Bread & Puppet summer performances at their home base in Glover, VT are always open to whoever shows up.

#5 – There is a deeper principle of theatre aesthetics behind this emphasis on what Jerzy Grotowski termed as “poor theater” – that’s poor as in little to no emphasis on complex / costly

production techniques but complete focus on actors and their actions. Bread & Puppet makes supremely effective use of Bertolt Brecht's V-Effect (alienation effect / *Verfremdungseffekt* in German) to separate character from circumstance and make objective commentary on politics, justice and basic human values. In this regard, the mute gigantic puppets are an extraordinarily resonant foil.

#6 – And one last statement before I tell you about the show itself. Bread & Puppet Theater has deep roots in a popular theater / performance tradition and commitment to social justice – somewhat like the Catholic Worker Movement of Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin – that spans many continents and cultures. Co-founder Peter Schumann brought a European tradition of topical street performance with him when he immigrated from multicultural Silesia to New York City. Elka Schumann (also a co-founder and chief editor of Bread & Puppet Press) was a social worker / activist in New York. The troupe uses many elements I've seen in Luis Valdez's Teatro Campesino and the San Francisco Mime Troupe – particularly the lack of emphasis on virtuosity for its own sake, the importance of (sometimes slapstick) humor, and the focus on uncluttered semiotics for clear, culturally literate communication. Part structured formula / part free-form improvisation it's a bit like hearing free-jazz pioneer Ornette Coleman play a Bach fugue.

About the show:

The performance – after a long wait interspersed with performative snippets that poked at and amplified the energy of the audience – burst out from backstage like a torrent of wind and the pace never faltered while the political through-line came into clearer and clearer focus. Please be warned, I'm only hitting some highlights here, and these briefly mentioned moments can in no way convey the full impact of these puppets and their actions. Hopefully, the photos included in this text will add more dimension to the words, though they were all shot on the fly with cell phones from an audience perspective.

After an energetic pageant style opening, the troupe took up the issue of Reparations for slavery in the Americas. The piece showed the damage done to stolen Africans using scattered puppet shards of a massively fractured black body. As narration around the concept of reparations progressed, the pieces of that body migrated as if magnetically attracted – but very slowly – to a center of gravity where the pieces merged, and (miraculously) that reconstituted body breathed as a whole giant being. The next segment – following right on the heels of the last – looked at an ongoing Climate Apocalypse complete with fire puppets chasing actors. Finally, the Horseman Mr. Death of the Final Apocalypse made its appearance as a dark / imposing giant puppet on his giant puppet horse. This puppet was defiantly banished after threatening all the actors and the front rows of audience and the show segued into a segment on Big AG – personified as a Big Dairy puppet and his corporate mouthpiece unveiled the newest in dairy tech: a self-milking cow that will replace manual labor, streamline distribution and lower production costs. As soon as Big Dairy unveiled this stitched together cow puppet, a demonstration of Latina Ag workers erupted from the audience and for a moment it was hard to tell where theatre left off and reality began – especially as the call & response demo chants were in Spanish. I was glad to have some (very) basic grounding in the language.

The performance morphed again and the scene became a migrant mother with a baby hiding from ICE officers on the border. Ultimately the denizens of La Migra were confounded and a flock of butterflies spirited the Mom and baby on their way into El Norte. To say this component had special resonance here in Texas (now matter where you stand on the issue) is truly a quantum understatement. Almost immediately, the scene shifted to Israel, the West Bank, and the ongoing Nakba. The central focus of the piece was a puppet portraying (being is actually more accurate) an older Palestinian woman asking (through a narrator) for the theft of her land to stop. This puppet was perhaps the most eloquent actor in the entire show: its deliberately slow, dignified movements, its face sculpted as a stoic mask of grief conveyed a sense of profound loss as she appealed to the world for justice. What came across had nothing to do with who's right / who's wrong. The enormity of her pain was so palpable, almost too much so.

The following piece was a rewind of geopolitics to the beginning of the 1980's and featured the largest puppet in the show, a Godzilla-sized version of Archbishop Oscar Romero. As a narrator read segments from his famous last sermon - a plea for peace in El Salvador - the Romero puppet gradually enfolded its arms in a compassionate embrace of a group of much smaller campesino parishioner-puppets, and ushered them protectively offstage. In the real world, Archbishop Oscar Romero was assassinated by a right-wing death squad while celebrating Mass, soon after that sermon. And the Iron Triangle region of Central America is still rife with political violence and abuse of migrants passing through while trekking toward El Norte. This current situation is often exacerbated by their developed neighbors to the north, and Archbishop Romero's message continues to resonate with important contemporary tones and alarms.

The final episode was mostly funny – depending, I guess, on your view of U.S. Supreme Court political dynamic. A human actor wearing a floor mop as a barrister's wig harangued and insulted the audience, posing as none other the John Roberts, Chief Justice of the United States. He arrogantly dismissed the efforts of a young lawyer pleading her case for women's reproductive rights, while puppets portraying the rest of the court's male members watched with glee. Then she threw down the gauntlet on him, pelted Justice Roberts with a box of condoms and a bra, ripped off her lawyer togs revealing yet another layer: a tiger tamer's costume. She called in a compatriot and two magnificent multi-operator tiger puppets that worked through some typical (but exquisite) large feline performance moves for the circus audience. Then, on command, they turned on and actually ate the male members of the Supreme Court of the United States, eventually lounging around like fat lazy cats, licking their paws and whiskers. The audience was speechless for a long pause. And then, pandemonium reigned and calls to “do it again.”

As we slowly walked out of the performance space into the night, I wondered how to gauge the existential significance of Bread & Puppet's road show, and weigh the relative importance of their message and their methods. True, they sing almost entirely to the choir; but because our body politic is so bent and damaged by polarization, I'm actually glad the other side did not have a presence. But any choir always needs some affirmations and “what if ... ‘wish fulfillment moments in their lives after so many defeats and failures of their efforts to change the course of society. It gives us all the courage and strength of heart to try again, to try another way, and to keep trying is all-important. It certainly helped me find some renewal to experience this show.

But is this art or is this just so much agitprop without nuance or perspective – that critical voice in my head drones on like a deeply imbedded self-improvement tape. Well, it's certainly not high art, but it most certainly does serve a higher purpose than most art when it leads us to consider how the elements of our collective social / political existence are usually kludged together for the benefit of the wealthy / powerful few, and the marginalized / voiceless many can just be damned. Augusto Boal – founder and prime conceptualizer of Theatre of the Oppressed – calls this energetic / disquieting undercurrent after such a performance a catharsis of activation – as opposed to the more passive, traditional Aristotelian reaction. It makes you realize you've got nothing left to think about, no reason to stay inside your head. Once again, you've seen how the world works and watched it change under the compelling spell of theatre magic. So now: it's time to go and do the thing, itself, in the world for real.

Visit: [breadandpuppet.org](http://breadandpuppet.org)

A montage of photos from Bread & Puppet in performance by Veronique Schlumberger & Michelle Rae

Photos in (suggested order of appearance)

- Apocalypse Defiance Circus Backdrop
- Opening Number in the Apocalypse Defiance Circus
- Resurrection from Slavery in the Americas
- Dire Horseman of the Climate Apocalypse
- Big Dairy & His Mouthpiece
- ICE Agents Capture Migrant Mother & Child
- Butterflies Spirit Migrant Mother & Child Away From Danger
- Palestinian Woman Asks the World for Justice
- Archbishop Romero & His Compañeros
- While Supreme Court Cowers, the Tiger Tamer Pronounces Judgment
- Backstage With Bread & Puppet (3)
- The Orange Show Venue for Bread & Puppet



APOCALYPSE DEFIANCE CIRCUS BACKDROP



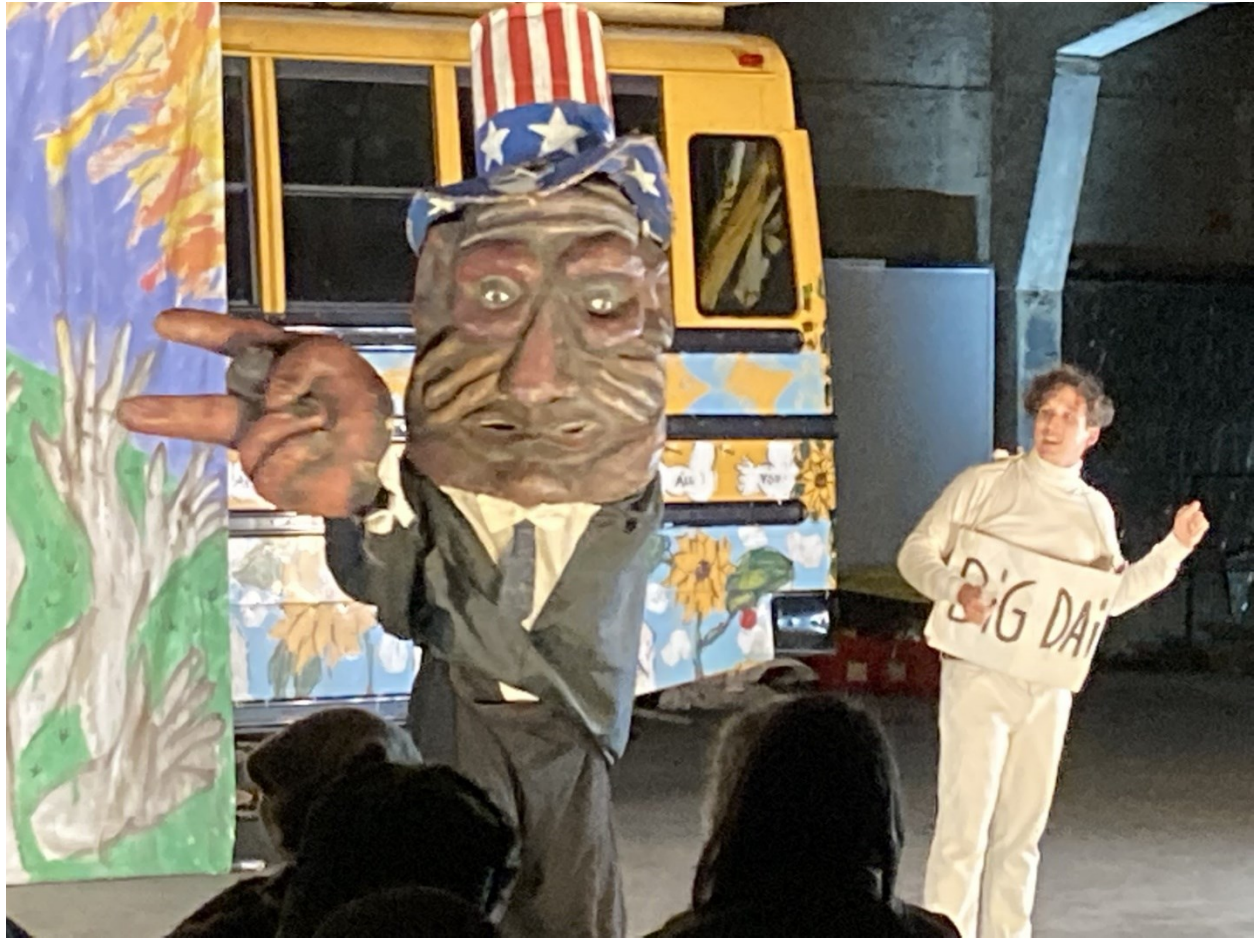
OPENING NUMBER IN THE APOCALYPSE DEFIANCE CIRCUS



RESSURECTION FROM SLVERY IN THE AMERICAS



DIRE HORSEMEN OF THE CLIMATE APOCALYPSE



BIG DAIRY AND HIS MOUTHPIECE

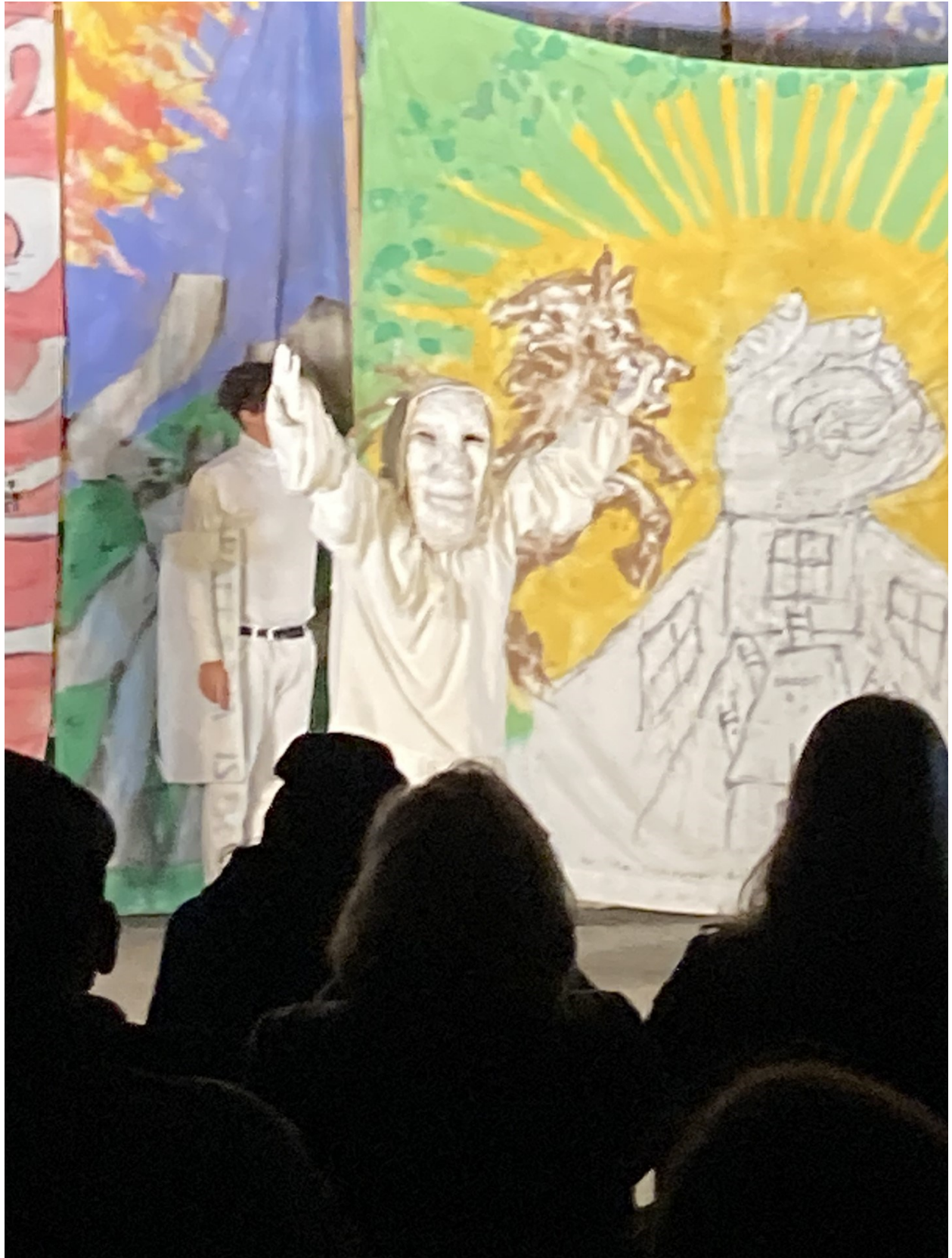


ICE AGENTS CAPTURE MOTHER AND CHILD



BUTTERFLIES SPIRIT MIGRANT MOTHER AND CHILD AWAY FROM  
DANGER

THINK ABOUT WHAT YOU HAVE SEEN BEFORE YOU SEE MORE



PALESTINIAN WOMAN ASKS THE WORLD FOR JUSTICE



ARCHBISHOP ROMERO AND HIS COMPANEROS



WHILE SUPREME COURT COWERS, THE TIGER TAMER  
PRONOUNCES JUDGMENT



BACKSTAGE WITH BREAD & PUPPET (3)



THE ORANGE SHOW VENUE FOR BREAD & PUPPET