

Chicago Fest

Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, January 17-27, 2019

Reviews and reports by David Herzog, Steven Widerman, and Jacqueline Wade



Caption

From David Herzog:

On odd numbered years Chicago is invaded for almost two weeks by a vast array of puppetry thanks to Blair Thomas and his amazing group of collaborators in a Herculean effort to bring contemporary puppetry to the Chicago theater community. This year, the third international festival, brought together over 20 companies from eleven countries in over 100 performances ranging from edgy and experimental to classic.

Ajiajack on Turtle Island Ibex Puppetry (Heather Henson), is an especial delight to the senses, due in no small part to the beautifully designed puppets from the Jin Henson Creature Shop, which move seemingly without effort from the puppeteers. (more on *Ajiajack* in a coming issue of *Puppetry Journal*).

Suspended Animation Having known Phillip Huber for over fifty years I will not attempt to review his production, except to say it was a delight to sit in an audience of non puppeteers seeing Phillip perform for the first time. Phillip has represented the finest of American puppetry at numerous international

puppetry festivals.

How to build a Flying Machine tells the story of The Wright Brothers journey to the realization of manned, powered flight. The artists of Moonbull Studio have, for the most part, created beautiful objects and puppets with which to tell the story. Two polyfoam mouth puppet portraying townspeople were less successful than the beautifully realized puppets of The Wright siblings, and the extraordinary delight of a ghostly Leonardo DaVinci complete with his man powered wings, who bemoans the fact that the Wright Brothers will achieve what he could not.

More than beautiful objects are needed for a successful show. This production did not have a finished feel. It seemed more like a work-in-progress with rough scene changes, missed lighting cues, and dropped lines.

It was obvious that the show was in need of a director to tune everything into a cohesive production. There is so much potential for this production. I hope this company is able to make this show

soar as beautifully as the Wright Brothers did.

Arde Brillante En Los Bosques De La Noche (Burn-ing Bright in the Forest of the Night) by Argentine Theater maker Marioano Pensotti is a gripping political drama portraying the way three women's lives are intertwined in their struggle with, and against communism. The play was performed in the native Spanish of the actors, but thanks to super-titles a non-Spanish speaking audience members could follow the play, aided by the very fine acting of the company.

The play is divided into three parts. The first third with the actors manipulating rather well built marionettes portrays how a professor of Russian history has lost her way. In part two the marionettes take a seat in a theater to watch a play which portrays the difficulties a guerrilla fighter returning home must deal with. The third portion of the performance is a film in which a journalist receives an unexpected promotion and must deal with its consequences.

While the marionettes used in the Professor's story in part one were well built, I can't see why the director choose to encumber the actors with them, except to suggest the characters in the play are puppets of their government, or to be able to show male frontal nudity, and sex acts without censorship problems. The actors were not well served by the marionettes, nor were the marionettes well served by the actors. Often the marionettes were dragged from one position to the next. It was very frustrating to watch, and about ten minutes into the play both the actors and the audience would have been better served if the marionettes had been simply tossed off stage. There was much lost potential with the puppetry utilized in this production. I do think, with the proper guidance the marionettes could be most effective in this production.

Reviewed by Steven Widerman

Schweinehund Through the use of stunningly sparse and wordless imagery, *Schweinehund* by Andy Gaukel and Myriame Larose, depicts the true experience of Frenchman, Pierre Steel, who was confined to a Nazi concentration camp during World War II in 1941, on suspicion of homosexuality.

Table-top puppets are skillfully manipulated Bunraku-style in a "curtain of light" behind a scrim that makes the puppeteers invisible to the audience. Animated birds and human cardboard cutouts are projected on the scrim that interact with the figures on the table top.

In the opening sequence, we observe Steel and his lover, portrayed in a romantic setting of projected trees and animated birds that fly above and interact with them. Disembodied human hands represent the war regime that abruptly ends the affair. Steel's capture and attempt to escape are emphatically blocked by the human hands of his oppressor. Disembodied bare human hands oppress the helpless puppet prisoners as they are imprisoned and tormented. The projections, representing Steel's memories of his lost lover, are accompanied by refrains from Claude Debussy's iconic impressionistic piano piece *Claire de*

Lune, which adds a melancholy atmosphere to the performance.

Director, Andy Gaukel, carefully walks a fine line, depicting a beautiful love story while presenting disturbing material without alienating the audience. The piece exemplifies an emotionally moving and powerful use of Puppetry.

Puppet Construction by Andy Gaukel, Myriame Larose & Nelson Fields; Performed by Myriame Larose and Andy Gaukel

Chambre Noire Plexus Polaire (France/Norway), New York performance reviewed in this issue by Diane Koszarki in Scene East

Earlier performances of these plays reviewed in *Puppetry Journal*: **Shanks Mare** by Tom Lee and Koryu Nishikawa V (USA/Japan); **The Pigeoning** by Robin Frohardt; and **Paper Cut**, Yael Rasooly (Israel);

Other festival shows included:

L'Après-Midi d'Un Foehn Version I, Compagnie Non Nova (France); *Tri Fata*, Compagnie Le Pendue (France);

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Caption

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Axis, Compagnie Gare Centrale (Belgium); *Pescador*, Silencio Blanco (Chile); *Manufacturing Mischief*, Pedro Reyes (Mexico); The Festival Neighborhood Tour included *Pulcinella*, Gaspare Nasuto (Italy) and *The Beginning of Nothing*, Poncilli Creacion (Puerto Rico); From Chicago: *The Stranger and the Shadow*, Nasty, *Brutish and Short*, Immaculate, *Poignant and Medium Length*, by Rough House; *Tabletop Tragedies*, by Cabinet of Curiosity; *Tedium and Other Sensations*, by Neo-futurists; *Atalanta*, by Leslie Danzig & Jessica Thebus

Just Another Lynching, Review and thoughts by Jacqueline Wade

The black and white words, “Just Another Lynching” appears across a movie screen. The phrase itself is traumatic. The puppet show begins. Throughout the performance, various archival photographs, collages, and illustrations appear on the screen. There are images representing home, store and landscapes as well as images of black bodies hanging from

that terrified African Americans and their families. Cornelius’s white friend is Jessie. The two men grow up in the harsh Jim Crow segregated South. They play catch ball together as boys having fun while undertones of racism is everywhere. In time, Cornelius meets Destiny Jones who is elegantly dressed and wearing pearls. There are tender beautiful moments as Destiny smiles and they dance. They eventually jump the broom and marry. Cornelius builds a house for his family and decides to open a store. Jessie helps with the building. Cornelius is ambitious and confident with dreams of a future. In the end Cornelius is falsely accused of fraud by a white businessman. Essentially a lie gets Cornelius lynched because he is a black businessman who make white men feel threatened by his success.

Just Another Lynching is a story that many African Americans have heard over and over. Yet, I felt like we the audience were living this experience of a lynching. At one point, the lights go dark. The puppet size KKK truck comes out into the

audience as the headlights pierced our eyes. The nightriders ride to capture Cornelius as if the Klan were chasing us. When the lights come up, Cornelius’ battered, disfigured, lifeless body hangs from a tree. We became witnesses to the atrocity of an innocent African American man being murdered. It is beyond comprehension and painfully sad. Within my own family a traumatic memory exists. My grandfather left Valdosta, Georgia, after a young pregnant African American woman was lynched.

I found it fascinating that the story was told from the point of the view of Cornelius’s white friend Jessie who delivers Cornelius eulogy. Tarish knows that in both the black and white communities there is an opinion that white people only listen to other white people. Jessie also seems to represent the consciousness and guilt of white America. Can a puppet show start to bring justice and healing?

From the talk back after the performance, many of the white audience members felt guilt from what they had witnessed on stage. They began to ask questions about white privilege and the denial they have had towards black suffering. Others said they witnessed racial inequalities and did nothing to stop them in the past. Some saw a connection between

lynchings and present day police murder of Black people. Many audience members were crying and wanted to know how they could correct things within themselves and injustices in society. The piece had struck a chord. A white puppeteer, Donovan Zimmerman from Paper Hand Intervention, who operated the puppet Jessie, told the talk back audience that in understanding white racism, and how to get rid of it within himself, that it is an ongoing lifelong process. Was the performance a social psychological experiment of ritual awakening, cleansing, and healing for audience members? Time will tell.

Tarish’s nine-year-old son was also a puppeteer. I asked him what was the effect of performing this show. The performance weighed heavy on this young man’s soul. We both cried.

Tarish does *Just Another Lynching* for his son. He does it for his family. Is it possible for the human family to learn from this piece? I tend to think *Just Another Lynching* will hopefully lead to positive change, action, and healing. It is part of the chain of the solution. What I know is Tarish’s puppets touch lives in a beautiful powerful way. This is a groundbreaking piece.



Caption

trees like fruit while mobs of whites celebrate in a carnival like atmosphere. There is a haunting acapella painful melody that weaves itself throughout *Just Another Lynching*. In the show, the five main puppets perform in front of the screen. The puppeteers do a wonderful job of bringing them to life. The beautifully crafted puppets are bunraku style. The color palette is black, white and gray which adds to the film noir feel of the entire piece. The puppets made from recycled cardboard and wood have sharp facial features, with deep set eyes. African American, self-taught veteran puppeteer Jeghetto, otherwise known as Tarish Pipkins, is the amazing artist behind this uniquely moving work. Major projects for Tarish include working with R&B rap legend Missy Elliott, and a social justice puppet piece on Frederick Douglass, performed in February at the University of Connecticut, Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry.

The powerful show presents the fictional life of Cornelius, an African American man from South Carolina. Tarish based the story on several different murders. From 1866 through 1955 there were over 4000 documented lynchings



Jim Henson and Bonnie Erickson at work, © Disney Enterprises, Inc.

Photos courtesy of Bonnie Erickson, Jim Henson Company Archives, and Philadelphia Phillies.

A Conversation with Bonnie Erickson

By Jeff Bragg

Bonnie Erickson is a well-known name for any fan of the Muppets. She had worked in costuming in New York City when Jim Henson asked her to join his team in 1970. She built costumes but soon, her talents in design, organizing, and administration made her an invaluable member of Henson Associates. Her famous characters, Statler and Waldorf, Zoot (built by Dave Goelz), George the Janitor, Miss Piggy and many more, were both designed and sculpted by her. In 1976 she and her husband Wayne Harrison founded their own business which became a major designer of international puppet commercials and sports mascots. Her former boss Jim Henson called on her frequently for special assignments. Bonnie also served as Executive Director of the Jim Henson Legacy.

Jeff Bragg currently serves as the Mid-Atlantic regional director of the Puppeteers of America, and president of the National Capital Puppetry Guild and the editor of the guild newsletter, Puppetimes. His series of informative interviews is a great contribution to the chronicle puppet history. Jeff’s interview with Bonnie Erickson first appeared in Puppetimes Nov.-Dec. 2018. This edited version appears with their kind permission.

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