In the backyard garden of one of the Castro’s Victorians, a small patch of ground has become an outsize stage. Some 30 attendees of a performance salon and fundraiser for Seth Eisen’s company, Eye Zen Presents, are listening to and sharing stories about the late Remy Charlip when suddenly there he is, embodied by a young dancer-performer named Colin Creveling.

Standing beside a set of vintage industrial sewing spools arrayed on the ground, “Charlip” announces his birthdate — Jan. 10, 1929 — and then briefly describes his childhood in a Jewish family in Brooklyn and explains how, after a stint at a textile high school, he grew willy-nilly into an artist.

“When I showed my mother the Eiffel Tower I’d made with toothpicks, she said, ‘I think Remy should be an artist,’” says the dancer, gingerly balancing a stack of spools on his chin. “It’s more practical.” A moment later comes a dance in a chair consisting of a few simple, lovingly precise gestures. “This is a dance I never made, for my mother.”

Somewhere between dances past and dances never made lies the vast, fertile terrain staked out by the Charlip Project, a multimedia dance theater performance exploring the life and legacy of dancer, choreographer, theater maker, designer, author, and teacher Remy Charlip (1929-2012), who lived the last 23 years of his life in the Bay Area.

A founding member of Merce Cunningham Dance Company, Charlip was many things in his long career, including a highly regarded children’s book author and illustrator. A much-loved artist, mentor and gay icon, he had a sharp, playful mind as well as an unusually warm and generous personality. He seems to have been friends — and often collaborator too — with practically every leading member of the avant-garde of his day, including, to name only a few, Robert Rauschenberg, John Cage, Jasper Johns, Paul Goodman and Lou Harrison (with whom he had a significant love affair as well as
friendship). When he died in 2012, he was being cared for around the clock by a dedicated group of local friends, among them Seth Eisen, who by that time had known Charlip for more than 20 years.

Sunday’s three hours of performances and presentations, hosted at the home of classical pianist Garrick Ohlsson and writer Bob Guter, was the first of several public programs and work-in-progress showings planned ahead of a November premiere at CounterPulse. It featured artists from the production as well as longtime associates of Charlip’s such as Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art curator Julie Lazar, who, as the person who invited Charlip to be MoCA’s first artist in residence, spoke in the living room about their long and highly productive relationship.

Back outside in the garden, longtime friends and Bay Area dance colleagues Joanna Haigood and Anne Bluethenthal danced together for the first time in a piece called “Woolloomooloo Cuddle,” one of Charlip’s famous Air Mail Dances. Built from a kind of storyboard of 20 to 40 figures in specific positions, Air Mail Dances flew by post to dancers and companies the world over. Because they do not indicate transitions, they invite the creative collaboration and elaboration of the other artists.

Photo: PAUL CHINN, SFC
Remy Charlip with one of the children’s books he wrote, 2006.

Photos: John Hill
Joanna Haigood (behind) and Anne Bluethenthal (front) perform one of Remy Charlip’s Air Mail Dances at a salon in support of Eye Zen Presents’ show about the artist.
What emerges from these performances and conversations is the sense that Charlip was brilliant in many spheres at once, often leaving even those who knew him with only a partial picture of the man. Moreover, his story is tied intimately to that of the Bay Area.

“He gave us all kinds of feedback in the early days of 848" Divisadero, says Michael Whitson, a musician and co-founder of the artist-activist space, which later became CounterPulse. “He was a natural teacher.”

Eisen met him as a 22-year-old student at Naropa University in Colorado, where Charlip was on the faculty. Later, in San Francisco, they continued their friendship. When Charlip had a stroke in 2005, Eisen became one of his caregivers. In Charlip’s last years, Eisen worked with John Held Jr. to archive Charlip’s enormous collection of personal and professional materials for the Charlip Project.

“I work in a trans-disciplinary way,” says Eisen. “I’m creating images from his life, and you’ll get a sense of many layers of things that were happening — his relationship with his mother and father, his Jewish side, his connection to being a gay man, his love and passion for writing and for creating books. That will be done through puppetry; we’ve created a puppet that will be both the much younger Remy and Remy as a much older man. The puppet is created from the tools he used as an artist.”

Photo: Gary Ivanek
An altar in honor of the late Remy Charlip, including a puppet made in the artist's likeness.
The presentations completed, everyone gathers in the garden once more. The wind has picked up and the sun is retreating behind the trees, as Eisen begins to address his guests and then falls silent mid-sentence, marveling at the sight in front of him. It’s Creveling, the dancer cast to play the young Remy Charlip, standing in one of the last shafts of sunlight. A large monarch butterfly has alighted on the dancer’s shirt, about mid-sternum, and is languidly opening and closing its orange-and-black wings. Creveling smiles, blissfully nonchalant. Eisen smiles back and resumes talking about their project. “I think Remy’s into it.”

Photo: Carl Van Vechten

*Freelance writer Claudia Bauer contributed to this report.  Rob Avila is a freelance writer based in the Bay Area.*

**The Charlip Project:** 8 p.m. Friday-Sunday, Nov. 4-20. CounterPulse, 80 Turk St., S.F. Artist talks and work-in-progress showings will take place in summer and fall; visit website for details as they are released. [www.eyezen.org](http://www.eyezen.org)

More about the project at Eisen’s blog: [www.eyezen.org/charlip-project-blog](http://www.eyezen.org/charlip-project-blog)

“The Woolloomooloo Cuddle: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dw9CKOKf47Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dw9CKOKf47Y)