

LIVE in New York City

Puppetry Performed in Unconventional Spaces

By Cheryl Henson



Voyeur: The Windows of Toulouse-Lautrec, on a New York street, Bated Breath Theatre Company. Puppets by James Ortiz. Photo: Richard Termine

When theaters in New York City went dark last winter due to the COVID-19 crisis, puppetry moved online. We have seen a blossoming of innovative puppet films, online puppet shows, and workshops. The puppetry community is extraordinarily inventive at problem solving, and it has been a delight to see that artists have not let the pandemic stop them from creating. But no matter how strong online puppetry becomes, it is the magic of LIVE puppet theater that I love most and have longed to see. Luckily for me, there are artists and theaters who feel the same way. Over the course of a month this fall, I was able to see four live performances, not in theaters, which have been barred from reopening, but in unconventional spaces.

Parking Lot

The first live puppet theater I saw this fall took place in the parking lot of the Clemente Soto Vélaz 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 Ogawa performed hand puppets from *New Mony*, 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 Bradshaw 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-



A Dance About the End of the World by Justin Perkins, one of three parking lot shows presented by Dixon Place.

Photo: Cheryl Henson

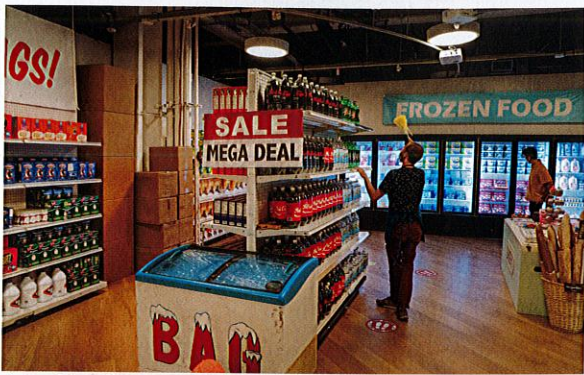
up hurdy-gurdy. Lighting attached to objects that the performers carried added to the sense of theater. We are introduced to Lautrec as he is played poignantly past his prime by Ortiz's puppet. The story begins in the windows of a house in Paris's red-light district, where Lautrec has not paid his bill. 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 live theater.

Times Square Store

The third piece I saw was *The Plastic Bag Store: A Tragicomic Ode to the Foreverness of Plastic* by Robin Frohardt, produced by Pomegranate Arts, commissioned 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

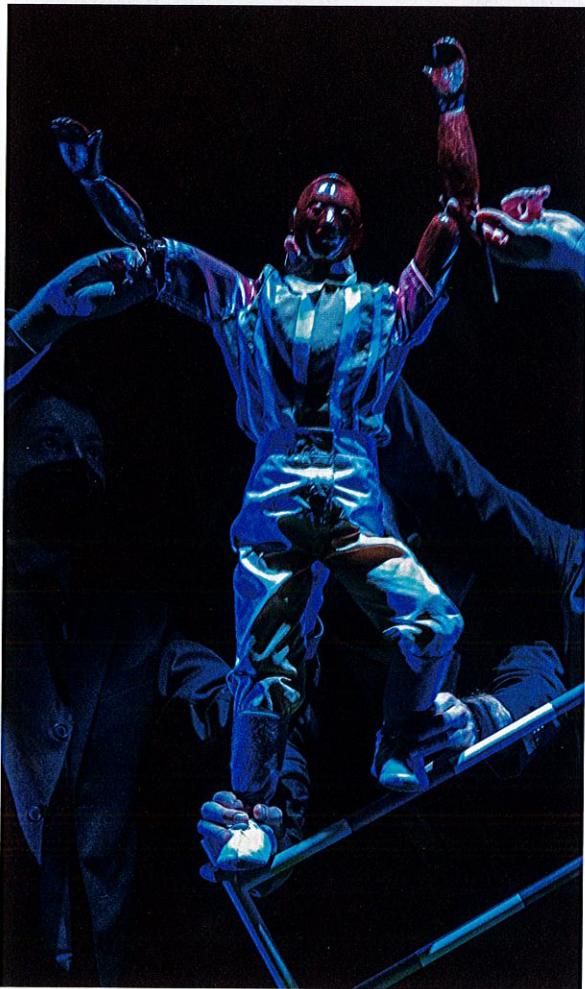
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The Plastic Bag Store, by Robin Frohardt, replica of a grocery store made from plastic waste. Photo: Richard Termine



The Plastic Bag Store, by Robin Frohardt, projection from immersive puppet play. Photo: Richard Termine



Fly Away by Derek Fordjour and Nick Lehane, Petzel Gallery. Photo: Richard Termine

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is a well-told, cautionary tale of our overuse of plastic, offering a poignant but humorous look at where it could lead. The show was to have opened in March on the day that New York City planned to ban single-use plastic bags. The puppet portion was originally designed to be performed live, but because it required an elaborate setup with multiple performers, a set of three films of the puppetry was used instead. The performances were excellent, and the films encouraged the audience to focus on small details of the puppets and story. Having the puppet portion recorded will allow the installation to travel to locations as far as Australia. Still, I hope that it will be possible to see this show performed live—ideally someday when New York City actually gets serious about the ban on single-use bags.

Art Gallery

The fourth and final piece I saw this month is called *Fly Away*, an exquisite collaboration between Nick Lehane and the visual artist Derek Fordjour. Performed in the Petzel Gallery on West 18th Street, this performance was allowed to take place because it was within an art gallery, not a theater. That said, a miniature theater was constructed inside the gallery, perfect in scale for a single puppet. The puppet is a young man who, like Derek Fordjour, is African American. The puppet is elegantly attired in a striped jockey shirt. His head is beautiful, like a Brancusi bronze. He glitters as he goes through the motions of multiple activities: cricket, football, horse racing, show jumping, elaborate dance moves of a university marching band. He is excellent, yet he trips up. The ball moves just out of reach, the horse disappears underneath him, and he is left jumping hurdles himself. He is caught in a dreamscape, dogged by pressure to perform but constantly undercut. He rebels against his minders, the puppeteers who have had control over his being. It is a gorgeously performed piece with an extraordinary team of puppeteers: Rowan Magee, Emma Wiseman, Andy Manjuck, and Dorothy James. Every simple gesture and complex movement is meticulously worked out to appear effortless. I felt deeply for the young man. This was the type of excellent puppet theater that I have truly missed. Having connected to the puppet, I felt that I knew something personal about Derek Fordjour whose extraordinary work was in the larger gallery. I asked my friend Dièry Prudent if he would write a review of *Fly Away*. Dièry and I had seen Nick Lehane's production of *Chimpanzee* together last year, and I found his observations particularly compelling. Please see Dièry's piece in this issue.

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. While theaters are closed to audiences, some venues are making their spaces available for artists' residencies. The Jim Henson Foundation is pleased to be able to help make many of these residencies possible.

Like little sprouts pushing their way through cracks in the sidewalk after a long, cold winter, these projects have the potential to grow to be healthy and strong, ready to be enjoyed once the pandemic is past. New life is on its way.

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