

***The World is Flat! A Weekend of Toy Theater at Links Hall February 25-28***

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*The World is Flat! A Weekend of Toy Theater* curated by Seth Bockley at Links Hall opened with the contemporary revivers of the form, Great Small Works from New York, presenting *A Short Entertaining History of Toy Theatre*, a lecture-song with pictures on the populist provenance of toy theatre. As Dr. John Bell flipped through photocopied images of Victorian families huddled on living room floors in front of miniature stages, and I gazed down on the rows of cushions sprawling into Links Hall's performance space, packed with multiple laughing, singing generations, the anarchic and democratic nature of the form was palpable. We were all on board.

As a collective made up of artists who are also performance scholars, curators, and historians, Great Small Works managed to wrap a pedagogically sound historical analysis inside the shaggy dog routine of their *Short Entertaining History*, equal parts medicine show, sing-a-long, and university lecture. More or less, toy theatre is a performance form in which miniature paper figures act out play scripts inside small proscenium arches, originally often shortened versions of hit plays inside replicas of actual famous theaters. Mostly these performances were a sort of amateur entertainment for informal evenings at home, before these days of the streaming Netflix queue. Bell makes the point that as theatre moved toward psychological realism and became more serious art than mainstream entertainment, the fun of putting on scripts at home diminished and the practice fell out of favor, though it has undergone a number of revivals over the years and variations are evident in many different cultures. The point, returned to again and again in a chorus I still can't get out of my head, being that "you can do it yourself." Bell connected

toy theatre to a number of populist and political art practices, such as Mexican broadside artist Posada, and encouraged the audience, in that favorite trope of performing artists everywhere, to make some toy theatre at home instead of watching TV or surfing the web.

In the packed, overheated Links Hall performance space, the rag tag orchestra playing a catchy tune beneath Bell talk-singing his way through his Xeroxed images in an off-meter almost-rhyme, the audience laughed and sang along with a generosity of spirit and shared sense of inclusion rare in the rarefied context of contemporary performance. We really did feel as if we could do it ourselves, what's more we felt we were doing it ourselves along with Great Small Works. We felt included. A shared communal presence overtook us and momentarily superseded categories of "performer" and "audience." As an audience member, I happily wait through hours of exquisite craft and transcendent image for a moment of mutual felt presence in the room. For me, this was the highlight of the evening.

However, this initial collectivity also introduced the evening's central paradoxical question – how does a form created as popularly accessible vernacular performance intended for very small scales in very intimate settings translate to the kind of professional quality mini-spectacle masterpieces that a paying audience expects, and which followed in due course during the rest of the evening? How does one become a master of a form that posits mastery as beside the point? I am not talking here about money, one of the immense pleasures in watching Great Small Works' work is the evidence of truly fantastic things being done with very few resources. I was reminded of instances of unexpected aesthetic ruptures that have impacted me: the Watts Towers in LA, or the Heidelberg Project in Detroit, or the radish sculptures of Oaxaca, Mexico – ordinary

materials, in ordinary contexts, made extraordinary by way of imagination, time, and will. One in fact spends much of the performance actively impressed by the material transformations that occur within such limited conditions. Despite the song running through my head, I kept thinking, “no, I could not do that myself.”

The idea, however, seems to be to suggest possibilities at the radical, and thrilling, extreme which, in turn, will incrementally influence the scope of my experimentation at home, as in the virtuosic cooking of a daring restaurant chef. If so much is possible with so little in the hands of these masters, perhaps a bit more than I thought could be possible in my amateur hands. And, as with that restaurant meal, whether I ever do it is beside the point. I have been included in something simple and inviting, which turns out to be bottomless in its potential complexity and wonder. Is this not the pleasure of all amateur pursuits? This pleasure is what much of the rest of the evening turned out to be about – the tension inherent in a simultaneous fascination with the miraculous intricacy and the deceptive simplicity of well-wrought toy theatre. And, though pleased and thrilled by the miniature spectacles I’d been treated to, I found myself wistful at the end for the inclusive, democratic, slightly off-kilter cerebral comic banter of *A Short Entertaining History* with which the evening started.

A few minutes later, Great Small Works was back with their second and final piece of the evening, *A Walk in the City*, based on Italo Calvino’s *Marcovaldo: or the Seasons in the City*. A miniature urban picaresque concerning the northern Italian industrial worker Marcovaldo’s fixation on discovering the natural and fantastical between the grids and beneath the surfaces of a gray and rigid concrete city not unlike Calvino’s hometown of Torino. The theater was a metallic

silver box, a bit wider than a phone booth, with a discrete chamber maybe two feet tall and three feet wide, set deep into its center, where Marcovaldo battled billboards on rooftops, projected imaginary dinosaurs onto the city's landscape, and most remarkably watched an actual flickering movie. In my seat a dozen feet away I felt my presence shifting, my consciousness projecting itself through this tiny opening in the silver-grey box and into the scaled down verisimilitude of the world it opened onto, internally complete and fantastically irregular.

This sense of physical displacement, the sudden miniaturizing, was remarkably real. All I had to do was decide to center my focus on the toy theater stage and there was no competing scale to throw off my kinesthetic understanding. One occasional solution to the problem of toy theatre in public performance is to simultaneously project a video feed, enlarging the image. In such cases, though, there is always a choice to be made between large and small versions and so the focus is on the existence of, and the discord between, the available scales. But with a clear view into the proscenium arch of *A Walk in the City*, I was remarkably unaware of scale at all. I was inside the toy theatre, integrated into its hyper-real interior logic despite all external clues to the contrary. Later, I heard frustrations voiced from some who had been sitting at the edges of the room and had felt cut off, excluded from what others were enjoying, aware of nothing but the limited circumstances of toy theatre. This brought back again the issue of scaling up the audience for an inherently scaled down form, while serving as a reminder of the remarkable transformation such miniaturization can offer if the relational dynamics are kept just right.

The human body and its presence were both ingeniously central to Meredith Miller's *The Abduction*, performed between the two Great Small Works pieces. Miller, an accomplished

designer and burlesque performer, presented a sort of bodily mash-up of the forms. A series of curtained toy theaters mounted on her body, from her head on down, invoked the tantalizing anticipation just before the unfolding of any performance. The tiny curtains parted to reveal her face, commanding and still, holding a look of unblinking wide-eyed, entranced horror. Little lights switched on. A paper moon rose. Thanks to the use of familiar and accessible imagery, the necessities of narrative gave way to formally self-aware issues of scale and framing. Each successive mini-proscenium further disjointed her body, positing it as a series of contiguous but disconnected parts rather than as a whole, each entry an opening onto inestimable internal volumes. The operatic scope of the doomed love story being played at different scales across her body suggested just how much might wait, unseen, inside.

Between her head and her chest Miller's shoulders were bare, suggesting an essential secret nudity – she was not clothed, after all, only curtained. It was like speaking to someone from the other side of a shower curtain – nothing is exposed, but one feels exposed. When the curtains to the toy theatre she wore around her torso like a halter-top opened, it was almost a surprise that she was not nude beneath. Instead a spatially disorienting dark expanse opened behind the curtains but before her body, in which a story of ambiguously gendered lovers played wordlessly without orientation of setting or scale. Rather than clarifying the spatial relationships of the several theatres stacked on this single body, each uncurtaining only further fragmented and displaced Miller's presence.

This confusion was reinforced, to surprising effect, by the revelation of the third theater, below Miller's waist. Suddenly the materiality of the whole project became embarrassingly present and

the parting of that third set of plush, dark, red velvet curtains felt positively indecent – Miller and her theatre had become one, the edges and openings of her body indistinct from the curtains of her bodily theater. Rather than the personal bodily displacement I would presently feel as I entered the miniature doppelganger universe of *A Walk in the City*, in which internal scale insistently held, here it seemed Miller’s three-dimensional body gave way to decontextualized empty frames accommodating two-dimensional 1920’s style colored cutouts in wildly varied sizes. In absence of external reference points, these inconsistently sized figures played out a deliberately flat story, the spatial, narrative, and emotional depth of which could be as voluminous as we chose to make it. Her wide, possessed eyes and her bare shoulders came in fact to be the only parts of her we could say for sure were there, and even they could just as easily have been puppets in their own fragmented theaters.

The second half of the program was not nearly as aesthetically coherent as the first and despite having been quite clearly instructed in the five basic elements which make up toy theatre during *A Short Entertaining History of Toy Theatre*, two of the three pieces in the second half clearly didn’t qualify. Though perhaps I’m being fussy about this, I don’t think it is because I am a stickler for disciplinary specificity, what I felt a loss of was the awareness of an essential instability in my own sense of scale, presence, and solidity that I’d stumbled upon in the first half. Suddenly three-dimensionality reared its head in a decidedly less playful way, bringing my relationship to the space-time continuum back to a considerably more familiar place.

Theatre Zarko’s *Haff, The Man*, created by Michael Montenegro, was a miniature stage play featuring lovely and well-handled tabletop rod puppets on realistic sets operated by six

puppeteers and accompanied by a fantastic (and large) musical ensemble on either side of the stage. The human presence, which had been whimsical, a joke or a trick, in the earlier pieces here became overwhelmingly real. The story concerned a pale and spindly half a man who, hobbling on one leg with a cane, tried to keep his mirror image other half from hanging around. The two halves drank and shouted at each other over murky past wounds involving a fire and a dead child like siblings in a Sam Shepherd play. A mysterious woman, from their past or possibly their future, got involved and the two half men finally had it out, physically wrestling their demons, before coming back to together in a dance-like interlude.

The swaying dance of the tenderly and intricately built puppets to the beautifully eerie music at the piece's close suggested a missed opportunity for a textually lean, poetic piece focused on puppet manipulation and sound, and dealing in an ambiguously open metaphorical way with our essential division from ourselves. Instead the performance focused on a psychological realism, using the familiar narrative arc of modern western dramaturgy, and took a pass on the more esoteric visual and sonic possibilities. With all that underutilized labor around, allowing the puppet manipulators to enter the frame of the narrative became irresistible and while the half men played out their rather conventional story, the metaphorical split the performance focused on was the one between puppet and puppeteer, rather than between the two halves of the divided figure on stage. Much contemporary puppetry seems to devote a great deal of energy to this relationship, puppet and puppeteer each regarding the other as simultaneously servant and master. This shtick usually gets laughs, as it did here, but in this case it distracted from the internal life of the objects within the frame of the proscenium arch, while failing to draw attention to any similarity between the puppet-puppeteer split and the split between the two

halves of the man. Most striking, though, in the context of the evening, was the unambiguous reintroduction of the human form after the sly tricks of framing offered in the first half, which managed to complicate the relationship of figure to object while choosing not to exploit it beyond the scope of the toy theater's stage.

A similarly meta relationship provided the basis for Chantal Colato's *The Photograph*, in which a cartoon-like old man had his picture taken. Perched inside a stage made of an "enormous antique field camera," he gave instructions to an unseen assistant – he was himself the photographer. In this instance, the puppeteer was largely hidden behind the apparatus of the camera/theater, so the recursive self-awareness of the relationship between the observer and the observed was entirely contained within the narrative frame. Once the concept was fully formed in my head, though, about 45 seconds in, I was mostly waiting for its logic to complete – the picture to be taken, the photographer to capture himself inside a frame that is itself a camera. A neat idea had it been played with the one-two punch timing the intellectual gag deserved. But again, the tension between the form as a vehicle to showcase artistic mastery and as a cheap and simple parlor entertainment came into play. Colato had expertly constructed her photographer, not out of paper, but of clay, and built for him a uniquely appropriate stage. She understandably wanted to use her well-made objects, not simply to use them up.

Finally, Blair Thomas of Blair Thomas & Co. presented *The Book of Jonah*, an adaptation of the church sermon on Jonah and the whale from *Moby Dick*, with Thomas as a sexy, satanic preacher manipulating illustrative black objects on the white field of his little puppet stage. A return to toy theatre proper, if it had come directly out of the clever spatial tricks of Great Small Works' and



Meredith Miller's pieces, Thomas's own performative presence might have played nicely against the diminished or obscured human-scale presences in the earlier pieces. But placed at the end of the evening, it was hard for me to wrestle my consciousness away from Thomas's performance and back to the toy theatre itself. This was largely thanks to Thomas's slithering, full on delivery of the sermon in Goth devil drag—a long black dress, long paper-mache fingernails, red eyeliner curlicues, and a prosthetic bare ass and tail. The performance was a satisfyingly disturbing overlay of fey serpentine sexuality onto the commanding presence of a fire and brimstone preacher (Orson Welles played the role in the 1956 John Huston film adaptation.) Thomas played it to the hilt. The toy theatre was itself a performative objective, a pop-up book proscenium introduced as an enormous biblical tome and slammed open in an instant to begin, then shut to end, the sermon. The objects he used were perfectly rendered silhouettes of man, boat, and fish in black squiggle-line paper cutouts. But they were hard to read as recognizable shapes at a distance against the theater's white paper background, and Thomas attended to them only intermittently as he slunk around the tabletop theatre, flirting, declaiming, and hissing at the audience. A virtuoso performance to be sure, still the toy theatre ended up oddly peripheral to the proceedings. The competition between Thomas's three-dimensional human body and his miniature, flat, paper objects had been decided, the human had won and the book was literally closed on the toy theater.

As an evening, *The World is Flat!* posited a discrete niche of theatrical performance where, however informally, scale and dimension are deliberately altered. I found to my surprise that, however briefly, I could believe in such an otherworldly parallel existence. I was transported, in a way I rarely have been in the full-scale live theatre. But this escape into the tiny world, its

verisimilitude and mad coherence, proved fragile, fleeting as Alice's Wonderland or a dozen other quickly lost fantastical worlds. Whether this was a result of transgressing disciplinary boundaries, of scaling up a form built for scaling down, or of my evolutionary hyper-awareness of human presence, it was also a reminder of how easily and completely imaginary worlds slip through our fingers.

*(Though The World is Flat! is over, Great Small Works and Blair Thomas will be back at Links during Banners & Cranks: A Festival of Cantastoria April 23-May 9.)*