

**Dan Hurlin**



*Disfarmer*





# Disfarmer

conceived and directed by **Dan Hurlin**

original music by **Dan Moses Schreier**

text by **Sally Oswald**

**produced by MAPP International Productions  
{premieres January 2009}**

By all accounts, Mike Meyer was a curmudgeon. So disgusted by his family and his small Arkansas farming community, he invented a new persona, fabricated his own history and legally changed his name to Disfarmer (“Meyer” means “farmer” in German, and “dis” means “not”). There could be no mistake that though he may have walked among his neighbors, he wasn’t one of them.

From 1928 to 1959, the Disfarmer Studio in Heber Springs, Arkansas was the only photography studio for miles, and having your picture “made” there on a Saturday night was the thing to do. Farmers from the surrounding county would come to Heber Springs to do their shopping for the week, catch a movie at the Gem Movie theater and then line up for the privilege of being insulted and ordered around by Disfarmer as he worked, sometimes for hours. Then, when everything was set and ready to go, Disfarmer would bark “Don’t y’all move and don’t y’all blink!” leaving his subjects to stand perfectly still in the brightly lit emptiness. Disfarmer used glass plate photography well into the 40’s – long after it had become an obsolete technology. Throwing a black cloth over his head while behind his camera, Disfarmer and his subjects could each be alone in the instant the photograph was taken – the lens that separated them, their only tangible link.

When Disfarmer’s photographs finally came to light in 1974 (twenty years after his death), the world was stunned. The portraits are at once simple and deeply complex. The backdrops are plain: only two choices, either light or dark. The lighting is even, not harsh. But his subjects are captured in all their beauty and guilelessness, with surprising compositional savvy and amazingly enough, a palpable empathy. The works are straightforward, unsentimental portraits of rural Americans, living in a rough place, in a hard time, but there is tenderness and a sense of longing that haunts the images. How could a man who so openly disdained his fellow citizens, portray them with such compassion? How could a man who so wildly misrepresented himself to the world, represent his neighbors so honestly and tenderly?

*Disfarmer* is a piece of Puppet Theater that examines these contradictions in the life of an American hermit. Alone but not despairing, longing but not lonely, Disfarmer is represented by a series of puppets, each an exact reprint of the last, except two inches smaller. During the course of the play, Disfarmer shrinks like the rest of rural America, until he is completely gone, and we are left with the quiet and nervous expectancy of standing perfectly still for a long exposure. Using the direct manipulation style of American puppetry known as “table-top puppetry,” and antique optical techniques like Magic lantern slides and 8mm home movies, five puppeteers show us Disfarmer in his studio as he categorizes his every possession, barricades himself from the outside world, and compulsively measures constantly expanding distances between things.

Set to oddly funny music from old Edison Wax disks and haunting Osark Mountain music, re-contextualized by Dan Moses Schreier, and with text by playwright Sally Oswald, *Disfarmer* is a portrait of a portrait artist. As technology and urbanization continues to distance us from our neighbors and our humanity (think Enron, think Iraq, think Wal-Mart), the portrait artist is inevitably a dying breed. Using his dinosaur technology, Mike Disfarmer was ahead of his time and his peers in his race to extinction.

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Usually, I start with some intriguing scrap from the pages of history – the more obscure or forgotten, the better: the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets; the 1859 unveiling of Frederic Edwin Church’s painting *The Heart of the Andes*; the visit of the Hiroshima Maidens to New York City. I research the subject extensively, looking for a personal connection to the past, a way in to all this history and culture we’ve collectively accumulated so far. I have always been drawn to stories from and about rural America. Perhaps as a means of investigating my relationship to my own history, having grown up in a small town in southern New Hampshire. So my attraction to the life and work of a nearly forgotten, Arkansas portrait photographer is a natural.

Being introduced to Mike Disfarmer’s photographs and learning his enigmatic history, I felt compelled to decode both the images and the man who made them. How did Disfarmer, who was by all accounts the town “Boo Radley,” manage to get his subjects to lower their guard for him so completely? How could this misanthropic outcast live his life resenting the rural isolation of Heber Springs, Arkansas, without ever making an attempt to break away?

While the subjects in Disfarmer’s portraits are (or were) real people with real lives, for contemporary viewers they are ciphers – repositories for our own daydreams and ruminations. “She is her sister,” we might think. “He is about to go off to War,” “They are lovers,” “That marriage is over.” Puppets are also blank slates, inanimate objects whose inner lives are supplied by the insistence of the audience’s imagination. This shared quality is what convinced me that puppetry was the appropriate medium to use in telling the story of Mike Disfarmer and his pictures.

The small town portrait photographer is a dying breed, and the body of Disfarmer’s work documents the vanishing world of rural America with astounding clarity. It has been suggested that, in some ways, Disfarmer was less an artist than a kind of scientist who pinned his subjects to a black backdrop like specimen butterflies. Puppetry is a medium that, while shrinking the subject to less than human size, magnifies their actions. I am putting Disfarmer and his photographs under the same intense scrutiny that he used on his family and neighbors, to understand and perhaps to even empathize with his photographs as deeply personal expressions of their time and place.

- Dan Hurlin





## Dan Hurlin

{designer, director, choreographer}

Dan Hurlin's performance work has been seen in New York City at Dance Theater Workshop, P.S. 122, LaMama ETC, Danspace, The Kitchen, Arts at St. Ann's and St. Ann's Warehouse, as well as at alternative presenting spaces throughout the U.S. and internationally. He received a special Village Voice OBIE Award in 1990 for his solo adaptation of Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*, and his suite of puppet pieces, *Everyday Uses for Sight: Nos. 3 & 7* (which premiered during the 2000 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater) earned him a 2001 New York Dance and Performance award (a.k.a. "BESSIE"). In 1998, Hurlin was nominated for an American Theater Wing Design Award for his set for *The Shoulder*, which was produced at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, CT. In 1992, his solo *Quintland* earned sculptor Donna Dennis a "BESSIE" Award for visual design.

His other performance works include an adaptation of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a duet for two men (with Minneapolis based playwright George Sand, 1986), voted one of the best plays of the year by the Boston Phoenix; *Archaeology* (1989), which toured extensively throughout New York and New England; *No(thing so powerful as) Truth* (1995); *Constance and Ferdinand* (with Victoria Marks, 1991); *The Jazz Section* (with Dan Froot, 1989); and his toy theater piece *The Day the Ketchup Turned Blue* (1997) from the short story by John C. Russell. Hurlin's most recent work, *Hiroshima Maiden*, with an OBIE award winning score by Robert Een, premiered at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2004 and was awarded a Citation of Excellence from the Union Internationale de la Marionette.

Hurlin has performed in the works of Ping Chong, Mary Overlie, Janie Geiser, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Otrabanda Company among others, and has directed premieres of work by Lisa Kron, John C. Russell, Migdalia Cruz, Dan Froot and Holly Hughes (including her OBIE award winning *Clit Notes*). In addition to having served as artistic director of Andy's Summer Playhouse, a theatre by and for children in Wilton, NH for fifteen years, he has taught at Bowdoin, Bennington, Barnard and Princeton, and is currently on both the dance and theater faculties at Sarah Lawrence College, from which he holds a B.A. He directed the Puppet Lab at Arts at St. Ann's in Brooklyn for ten years. He formerly served on the Board of Directors for the Jim Henson Foundation and is currently on the Board of Directors for the MacDowell Colony. Hurlin has received individual artist fellowships from the NEA, New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Creative Capital Foundation. In 2002, he received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and in 2004, he was the recipient of the Alpert Award in the Arts for theater.



## Dan Moses Schreier {composer, sound designer}

Dan Moses Schreier attended University of Michigan, where he studied music composition with William Bolcom and worked on the new musical, *Up from Paradise*, a collaboration between Arthur Miller and Stanley Silverman based on Miller's play, *The Creation of the World and Other Business*. After his freshman year, Schreier moved to New York City to work as Stanley Silverman's assistant, continuing his studies in music composition at Columbia University. As sound designer, he worked with director Richard Foreman on seven productions, and created a series of soundscapes for the plays of Jeffrey M. Jones at the Performing Garage, culminating with the receipt of an OBIE Award for sustained excellence in Sound Design. With performing artist and puppet master Dan Hurlin, Schreier created the chamber opera, *The Shoulder*, which premiered at Dance Theater Workshop in 1998, toured nationally, and enjoyed a run at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, CT (the original cast CD is available on the Innova label). Schreier continues to compose and sound design in New York City, where he has worked on numerous Broadway and Off-Broadway productions, including *Julius Caesar* starring Denzel Washington; *The Glass Menagerie* starring Jessica Lange; the premiere of Tony Kushner's *Homebody/Kabul*; Stephen Sondheim's *Assassins*, *Pacific Overtures* and *Sweeney Todd*; *Dance of Death*; *Major Barbara*; *The Ride Down Mt. Morgan*; *The Tempest*; *Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk*; *Floyd Collins*; and *Spic-O-Rama*. He is the recipient of three Drama Desk Awards for sound design; a 2004 L.A. Ovation Award; and the 2003 Entertainment Design Award for Sustained Excellence.

## Sally Oswald {playwright}

Sally Oswald is a playwright and the co-editor of *Play: A Journal of Plays*. She is the author of a cycle of Philadelphia plays and is at work on a new group of plays inspired by Shakespeare's so-called Romances that are by turn scripted slide-show, pastoral, or dance-theater. Sally recently wrote a libretto for Nora Kroll-Rosenbaum's London Symphony Chorus commission. Her work has been developed or produced with the Flea Theatre (2005 residency), New Georges, the Ontological-Hysteric Theater, Galapagos, St. Ann's Warehouse Puppet Lab, The Public Theater, Little Theater at Tonic, Dixon Place, Voice and Vision, Ensemble Studio Theater, The Hangar Theatre, and Polybe+Seats. Honors include a Jerome Fellowship from the Playwrights Center (2007-8), a Thurber Fellowship (2006), residencies at the MacDowell Colony (2006) and Millay Colony (2006), a Dramatists Guild Fellowship (2003-04), an Ensemble Studio Theatre New Voices Fellowship (2004), the Weston Award (2003), and the Kenneth Janes Theater Prize (2001). She holds an MFA from Brown University and a BA from Barnard College. Sally's writing on new plays has appeared in *PAJ* and the *Brooklyn Rail*. Her plays have been published in *Factorial*, *Encyclopedia*, and by *Baker's Plays*. She has co-produced performance events at New Dramatists and The Empty Space Theatre for Play, and co-curates the Experimental Text Festival with Jennifer Tsuei for the Ontological-Hysteric Theater. Sally has taught playwriting to graduate, undergraduate, and high-school students at Ohio State University, Brown University, and with Young Playwrights of New York and Philadelphia.



## {press}

“Hurlin creates beguiling worlds of his own-- with their mix of geekish humor, intellectual inquiry, and alarming frankness they often seem like pint-sized versions of the world of Robert Lepage.”

*The Daily Telegraph, London*

“Telling a story mostly without spoken language, Hurlin employs an intuitively understood symbolic language, imaginative and elaborate but remarkably clear and efficient.”

*The Brooklyn Eagle*

“Hurlin uses a mixture of models, shadow puppets, marionettes, and monologue to explore ways of seeing and being seen-- like a pop-up book for grown-ups.”

*The London Times*

“In *Hiroshima Maiden*, Dan Hurlin has told, exquisitely and movingly, a tale of despair, guilt, and political manipulation....His brilliant use of puppets eerily both distances us from the horror and intensifies it.”

*The Village Voice*

“Hurlin extends what might have been a subversive, ironic goof into a delicate parable of reconciliation and forgiveness....The result is thoughtful and often quite beautiful, with several marvelous puppet effects that convey complex feelings with economy and wit. Hurlin’s imagination is to be commended for gracefully restoring a lost episode of cultural history.”

*Time Out New York*

“In *Everyday Uses for Sight Nos. 3 & 7*, Dan Hurlin created a daisy chain of incisively poignant, poetic moments, reaching the heart of each member of the sold-out audience...”

*The Dance Insider*

“Hurlin’s hurtling, gleefully dead-on performance is a marvel, his collage writing a triumph.”

*The Village Voice*

“...the most caring, big-hearted, open-minded, celebratory theater work imaginable.”

*The New Haven Advocate*

“Hurlin’s virtuosity is an argument for the power of individualism.”

*The Village Voice*



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