

Off Broadway

Disfarmer

(St. Ann's Warehouse; 274 seats; \$42 top)

By **SAM THIELMAN**

A St. Ann's Warehouse presentation of a play in one act conceived, designed and directed by Dan Hurlin, created by the ensemble with text by Sally Oswald.

With: Matt Acheson, Eric B. Davis, Chris M. Green, Hurlin, Guy Klucsevsek, Tom Lee, Darius Mannino, Eric Wright.

As beautiful and precise as a model railroad, Dan Hurlin's lush "Disfarmer" fills the stage with all the tiny, heartbreaking miracles that make up the lonely life of his puppet hero. Scale is just for fun here: A doll-sized hat blows through a four-inch-high forest, sticking in a miniature tree; a door large enough for a garden gnome flaps; and the first of Hurlin's many tornadoes blows life-sized detritus across the stage. The final result is much more than the sum of its carefully crafted parts. Moving, poignant and occasionally hilarious, "Disfarmer" is a wonder.



Given life by five talented puppeteers, Mike Disfarmer claims to be a foundling child blown onto his mother's doorstep by a tornado. He's now working as a portrait photographer while living alone -- very alone -- in Arkansas.

When we first meet him, Disfarmer is at about half scale: large enough to come up to the waists of the puppeteers. The Disfarmer puppet itself is dressed in Depression-era workday clothes, with glasses perched on a colorless, hairless, expressionless head.

Amazingly, we know what he's thinking nearly all the time simply by watching his body language. We see him get drunk, ponder the inevitability of change and cower in terror of further inclement weather. Either that or being alone.

There's never a moment in which Disfarmer isn't fascinating, but it's particularly interesting to watch him go to sleep: He takes off his shoes, lies under the covers, and while the other puppeteers move on to rearrange the set, one stays behind to make sure Disfarmer breathes, deeply and evenly.

Using the puppet as a guide, Hurlin (aided by Dan Moses Schreier's wonderful bluegrass underscoring) shows us around smalltown Arkansas as rendered atop a half-dozen rolling carts that unfold or roll together to form Disfarmer's house, his studio, his local grocery store and the roads he uses to get there.

All these are populated by furnishings that vary from Disfarmer-scale to wildly larger or smaller -- here a tiny countryside, there a life-size grocery store manned by a puppeteer (whose interactions with the cranky Disfarmer are a lot of fun to watch). The stagehands themselves are costumed in navy and black by Anna Thomford, doubling as townspeople when they're not providing our hero's arms and legs.

Hurlin's counterpoint to all this obsessive attention to detail -- his own and the subject's, as seen in Disfarmer's pictures -- is the tornado itself, which can and will destroy any object in its path. Each time it passes -- and sometimes it seems to be blowing by only in Disfarmer's mind -- it leaves our hero diminished, literally. By the end of the show, he's a tiny little thing, railing about the quickest and safest ways to escape the ravages of the weather.

In an odd and totally unexpected way, Hurlin is using his misanthropic, shrinking hero to illustrate transience, both in the character's slow miniaturization and in his portraits, regularly displayed on a scrim behind the main action. The people in the photos are mostly dead. And this man can't keep himself from fading away, not even with his work. By the time our 90 minutes with Disfarmer has ended, it's become more than a clever biography or a series of dazzling technical feats: It's shown us life, in miniature.

Costumes, Anna Thomford; lighting, Tyler Micoleau; original music, Dan Moses Schreier; video, David Soll; production stage manager, Aaron Rosenblum. Opened Jan. 27, 2009. Reviewed Jan. 29. Running time: 1 HOUR, 30 MIN.

Time Out New York / Issue 697 : Feb 5–11, 2009

Theater review

Disfarmer

St. Ann's Warehouse. By Sally Oswald. Dir. Dan Hurlin. With ensemble cast. 1hr 30mins. No intermission.



OVER THE THRESHOLD The puppet Disfarmer answers the door.

Photograph: Pavel Antonov

landscape, the piece shushes us with details. The puppeteers—an all-star assortment including Tom Lee and Eric Wright—make a storm out of minutiae: a hat caught in a fence, the juddering of a street sign. By the time we get to Disfarmer himself, a two-foot-high Bunraku puppet with a bad leg, we've been trained to look closely and keep still.

Disfarmer was every bit the outsider artist: He believed he was a tornado's changeling, and he kept aggressively to himself. The effect of Hurlin's Bunraku style, in which multiple handlers operate a child-size figure, gives this depiction of a loner an unexpected note of tenderness. The puppeteers don't "disappear"—we see them moving Disfarmer with gentle concern, like a grateful future version trying to alleviate the sting of his past. We do eventually see a self-portrait of the man himself, but it fades quickly. The piece will not.—Helen Shaw

It's no wonder puppet master Dan Hurlin was attracted to the story of Mike Disfarmer, an eccentric small-town photographer from the 1920s whose pictures have climbed the rickety ladder into high art. Disfarmer's portraits—some of which are on display at St. Ann's Warehouse—spread a small stillness, even with a lobby full of theatergoers craning to see them. And while Hurlin's elegiac Disfarmer is full of sound (Dan Moses Schreier's excellent, folksy score) and repressed fury (Sally Oswald's fragmented text), it too gives an impression of expanding silence.

From the outset, when we see a tornado striking an Arkansas



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Photo by: Richard Termine

Disfarmer PICK

February 02, 2009

Reviewed by Leonard Jacobs

How do you dramatize an enigma? In *Disfarmer* -- a piece about the mid-20th-century portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer-conceiver, director, and designer [Dan Hurlin](#), the endlessly inventive master of puppet theatre, deliberately chooses not to fill in any of the gaps. Disfarmer was so elusive, so odd as he lived quietly and alone for decades in rural Heber Springs, Ark., that it's Hurlin's conceit to dramatize not what we know of the man but what we don't.

For example, we don't know why [Mike Meyers](#) rejected the farming life and his German ancestry and changed his surname to Disfarmer, which sounds like it's intended to deny his heritage. We don't know why he claimed to have landed in the Meyers family by dint of a tornado. We don't know why he worked in glass-plate photography, passé by the time he began in 1917. Questions, not answers, are Hurlin's focus.

Whether accompanied by a bluesy, evocative onstage band (including banjo, drum, and fiddle) or by prerecorded music from Edison wax cylinders and other aural artifacts, a succession of Disfarmer look-alike puppets, each one two inches smaller than the last, are seen heading to bed or awakening, drinking too much, and engaging in such neurotic pursuits as measuring the distances around his ramshackle home or his photography studio to ensure that all is stable in his world. (I could not help but notice that all the *Disfarmer* puppets resemble the American architect Philip Johnson.)

There is such precision in this winsome work that puppeteers Matt Acheson, Chris M. Green, Tom Lee, Darius Mannino, and Eric Wright must be congratulated. One wonders how Hurlin, serving as the narrator, experiences his piece from a corner of the stage, watching us watch his work.

Then again, maybe it's a reflection of the idea that a man living hermetically, isolated from society, is apt to be strange but not inaccessible. As David Soll's excellent film sequences prove, the beauty that *Disfarmer* couldn't see in his own life unmistakably comes through in his extraordinary photographic art.

Presented by and at St. Ann's Warehouse,

38 Water St., Brooklyn, NYC.

Jan. 29-Feb. 8. Tue.-Fri., 8 p.m.; Sat., 2 and 8 p.m.; Sun., 4 p.m. (212) 352-3101, (866) 811-4111, [Theater Mania](#), or [St. Ann's Warehouse](#).

Links referenced within this article

Dan Hurlin

<http://www.backstage.com/bsa/about/Dan+Hurlin>

Mike Meyers

<http://www.backstage.com/bsa/about/Mike+Meyers>

Theater Mania

<http://www.theatermania.com>

St. Ann's Warehouse

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Disfarmer inspires puppeteer

BY KYLE BRAZZEL

Posted on Sunday, February 1, 2009

URL: <http://www.nwanews.com/adg/Style/251178/>

Dan Hurlin remembers the first time he looked upon the baleful gazes, bony shoulders and weatherbeaten nobility of the subjects of the Heber Springs portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer.

"I was in a Barnes & Noble, of all places," Hurlin said Tuesday, the morning he was set to debut a new stage show inspired by the final week of the photographer's life. Hurlin's medium is something he calls "table-top puppetry," and the venue for the show, titled Disfarmer, is a spacious former spice factory in Brooklyn, N.Y.

"The people just sort of jump off the page at you," Hurlin continued, in reference to the portraiture of Disfarmer, which occupied the photographer throughout the Depression and war years as the residents of Heber Springs furthered flirtations, sent their men off to war and generally documented Saturday trips to town with a stop by the photography studio.

"By all accounts, Disfarmer was a curmudgeon," Hurlin said pointedly. "I think he frightened people. They have this look about them that looks like they're ready to flee. I think that's why they jump out at you. They're not daydreaming - their reflexes are really wired up."

So, too, that morning, was Hurlin, the curtain-raising on his 80-minute puppet show mere hours away. "Nap! I have to take a nap!" Hurlin exclaimed when asked what the remainder of his preshow day would entail.

But the puppeteer sounded way too caffeinated for rest. "Oh, good Lord, you name it," he sputtered upon being prompted to muse over what could still go wrong. "A leg could fall off."

In a way, this puppeteering catastrophe would complement a central conceit of the show. Of the Disfarmer-related narrative threads available to him, Hurlin had chosen the one with the least amount of primary-source material: Disfarmer's inner life. This meant he had rejected focusing on the photographer's posthumous celebration by New York's fine-art world, or on projecting what was going on in the minds of Disfarmer's often inscrutable subjects.

"I didn't want to write monologues for those people in the pictures," Hurlin said. "I thought that would be kind of corny."

Instead, the artist began to think of Disfarmer's cipherlike profile as an opportunity. "It gave me the freedom to make stuff up," he said.

Structurally, this act of invention translates onstage (the production continues at Brooklyn's St. Ann's Warehouse through Saturday) to a depiction of the last seven days of Disfarmer's life. He has become reclusive and is shown compulsively taking his own height and measuring his feet. He has filled his refrigerator with chocolate ice cream and beer. Two swapouts of the puppet representing Disfarmer are made - Hurlin is speculating here - before the audience realizes that the puppet is getting smaller and smaller. The man is literally shrinking as he dies, but the downsizing also evokes the photographer's gradual withdrawal from town life and his own work. (The grocery stockpiling is for a time when he is too small to visit the grocery store.)

"It's a very surreal little play," Hurlin said. Of the score, which blends banjo and flash guitar, "it's sort of like country music," Hurlin said, "but country music meets the avant-garde."

MULTI-MEDIA

In order to visually represent the photographer's peculiar sense of composition, Hurlin wrote into the script a montage of Disfarmer photographs, used near the end of the show. But these soon swirl into a tornado of imagery, a reference to Disfarmer's dark fixation on funnel clouds.

Otherwise, the production is not even so literal as to use a faithful physical resemblance of Disfarmer. In designing the Disfarmer puppet, Hurlin took cues from a photograph Disfarmer shot of himself, but did not replicate it.

"In that one self-portrait, he has enormous ears, but I felt like a puppet like that is going to read to people of a certain age as Howdy Doody," Hurlin explained. "So I gave him a big nose instead."

In a sort of puppet-world retelling of *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, Hurlin built six versions of the Disfarmer puppet, each a little smaller than the previous one. He worked in the studio, a renovated former Catholic church on the banks of the Hudson River, that he also uses as a weekend and summer escape from his Manhattan apartment.

"The heads are papier-mache, the bodies are a combination of wood and wire and steel and rope and foam rubber," Hurlin said of his Disfarmers. "Anything that works. The correct term would be multimedia. He's got clothes that are very well-made."

Disfarmer is not Hurlin's first foray into the genre of semi-biographical puppetry. His most recent work was *Hiroshima Maiden*, in which he used puppets to tell the true story of a group of Japanese women who traveled to the United States in the 1950s for surgery to repair injuries from the atomic blast, and who raised money for the procedures by appearing as contestants on *This Is Your Life*. Before that, he created a puppet version of Alvin Straight, the Iowa man who traveled to Wisconsin on his lawnmower to visit his ailing brother.

"David Lynch made a movie about the same subject," Hurlin allowed. "But I got there first!"

But Hurlin feels perhaps a stronger connection to Disfarmer than his earlier protagonists. For one thing, the photographer's outsider status reminded him of

eccentrics from the small New Hampshire town where he grew up. There was a cross-dressing woman called the Man-Lady, he recalled, as well as another woman who would walk in front of moving cars on the highway then, once they'd stopped for her, enter by the passenger-side door and announce her destination with a casual sense of entitlement.

For another thing, Hurlin developed an affection for the town of Heber Springs when he repaired to a bed-and-breakfast there three years ago, supported by various grants including one from the National Endowment for the Arts, to begin researching Disfarmer's life and times. Hurlin remembered an episode in the Cleburne County Courthouse in which he came across the original documentation of Disfarmer's legal name change from Meyer, believed to have been sought by the photographer to disassociate himself from "farmer," the German meaning of his family name.

"It was really like we were treasure hunters," Hurlin said. "We started shaking and screaming - 'Here it is!'"

After Disfarmer wraps up its Brooklyn run, the show is bound for a handful of East Coast universities, but beyond that - "Oh, good Lord, beats me," Hurlin said with some trepidation. There has been some talk of mounting the show in Arkansas, perhaps in conjunction with the Arkansas Literary Festival, but nothing has been settled. As Hurlin spoke, Peter Miller, the Little Rock lawyer credited with helping Disfarmer's work reach the gatekeepers of New York galleries, was en route to New York, scheduled to participate on a panel discussion following this past Wednesday's performance of the work.

"Oh my God, can you imagine doing it in Heber Springs?" Hurlin gasped. "I would plotz!"

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December 20, 2009

Creations of the Offspring of 'Orestes'

By [CLAUDIA LA ROCCO](#)

ART, like nature, is cyclical. It is also a fabulously messy, sprawling business, especially in periods when artists are intent on questioning definitions and boundaries. Is it dance? Is it theater? Is it performance art? Does it matter? Not in years like this one.

Few artists make categories seem as happily irrelevant as Paul Lazar and Annie-B Parson of Big Dance Theater in their exquisitely constructed collaborations. I reviewed their Orestes as theater, but the work, which ran at the [Classic Stage Company](#) in the spring, is a choreographic knockout as well, one that has grown more resonant for me as the months have passed.

"It seems funny to me to have any theatrical event where people don't dance," Ms. Parson said when I interviewed her this fall. "It just doesn't feel true." (The interview was about another richly layered Big Dance work, "Comme Toujours Here I Stand"; the article ran under a dance label, thank you very much.)

"Orestes" felt unerringly true. It's no small thing to make [Euripides](#) (as brilliantly translated by Anne Carson) fly in the 21st century, and Ms. Parson's deft, sometimes surprising choreographic choices were a major reason for the production's success, as they allowed the body's physical, sensual logic to complicate and ground Euripides' fiery onslaught of language.

There were other reasons behind the production's power, namely the keen directorial eye of Mr. Lazar and Ms. Parson and the staggering talent of the cast, including the wickedly funny David Neumann, whose new work will have its premiere at the Kitchen in March.

Like Mr. Neumann, many "Orestes" cast members are creators themselves, and they provided some of 2009's other category-defying highlights.

Steve Mellor, who dazzled as the suave, perfidious Menelaos in "Orestes," put his deadpan face and fluttering fingers to use this month at the Chocolate Factory, where he and the astonishingly adroit Deirdre O'Connell gave audiences a free-associative, absurd yet touching song-and-dance routine in The Dream Express, Len Jenkin's disreputable lounge act.

Dan Hurlin and Karinne Keithley made up the affecting chorus in "Orestes," mixing dance, music and words into a funny, poignant, sometimes biting commentary. At the time Mr. Hurlin was fresh off his own puppetry show, Disfarmer, a quiet tour de force which ran at St. Ann's Warehouse in January and February.

“Disfarmer” was verbally spare, relying heavily on the exact, delicate choreography of puppets and props to evoke the strange inner life of the 20th-century photographer Mike Disfarmer. This intimate portrait also offered a larger meditation on the act of creation, both through its craft and content. The tender devotion of master puppeteers to their puppets is a deeply human endeavor. At its most sublime this relationship acquires a spiritual dimension, and such was the case here.

Meanwhile Ms. Keithley’s Montgomery Park, or Opulence was a treasure trove of oddities and styles: half-told stories shared time with gentle songs and funny little dances. It had a too-brief run in September at the Here Arts Center, but the script, an adventure all on its own, can be purchased through 53rd State Press, Ms. Keithley’s one-woman publishing house for contemporary performance writing.

One of Ms. Keithley’s authors is Miguel Gutierrez, and a mention must be made of his Last Meadow, which ran in September at [Dance Theater Workshop](#). The relentless, grand exploration of American culture saw Mr. Gutierrez reaching for new heights. His undeniable star was the stellar dancer Michelle Boulé, whose haunting portrayal of [James Dean](#) showed her to be every inch an actor as well and just might have been the revelation of the year.

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the village

VOICE

Investigating history with miniature players; dancing wary, scary love letters with style

In 1955, 25 young Japanese women, horribly disfigured when the U.S.A. dropped an atomic bomb on Hiroshima, were brought to this country for plastic surgery. In *Hiroshima Maiden*, Dan Hurlin, with input from historian David Serlin and one of the eponymous "maidens"—peace activist Michiko Yamaoka—has told, exquisitely and movingly,

a tale of despair, guilt, and political manipulation set in an America where kids prepared for possible atomic attack by crawling under their desks and covering their eyes. Television was fairly new and one small boy (standing for Hurlin himself) found Lucy Ricardo, in her wacky predicaments, the ultimate horror.

Dawn Akemi Saito, the only speaker, provides the little boy's memories, TV voices, and other words. The "maiden" herself is silent; a doll in a red dress, manipulated via small sticks and hands-on techniques by three black-clad puppeteers. Hurlin has borrowed from the Japanese Bunraku tradition, but has also transformed it. These puppets are not confined to a small area. Their handlers race them across the stage. In one powerful scene, the heroine, fleeing the flames, leaps from rooftop to rooftop, slipping, hanging on by her little hands, and falling, as peaked-roof shapes on sticks are tilted and swayed and finally come apart. Robert Een's excellently supportive music (played and sung by the composer, Jeff Berman, and Bill Ruyle) conveys her panicky struggle.

The nine actor-dancer-puppeteers never rest. They manipulate the heroine; the boy; the pilot of the *Enola Gay*; the minister, Kyoshi Tanimoto, who instigated the trip to the U.S.; *Saturday Review* editor Norman Cousins, who made the arrangements; a photographer; and a State Department official who forbade the publication of pictures showing the maidens' faces, to avoid arousing pity for former enemies and undermining Cold War patriotism. This raging official and the photographer have a terrific knockdown fight. In Tyler Micoleau's atmospheric lighting, the humans also "dance" the panels of the set, the rolling tables, signs with pointing arrows, and many ingenious props. They whirl and tip panels to provide aerial views or convey distances traveled. They don white coats and portray doctors. They appear in a shadow play representing Ralph Ed-

Dance

TALE OF A RUINED FACE

BY DEBORAH JOWITT



Photograph by Steve J. Sherman

wards's fulsome *This Is Your Life* installment featuring Tanimoto.

Hurlin's brilliant use of puppets eerily both distances us from the horror and intensifies it. Classical *ukiyo*e portraits of the women held up on sticks develop yawning red cracks. Slipping doll-sized kimonos over one arm (costumes and soft furnishings by Anna Thomford), several puppeteers dance decorously while others supply blank egg-shaped heads, then with chilling formality return to substitute cracked heads or to remove a head entirely. The subtle gestures by the "maiden," immured in her room out of family shame (their ancestors must have done something wrong!), can break your heart. And so can Hurlin's delicate and oblique comment on American values of the time. The Hiroshima Maidens did not become postcard beauties; they were simply the lucky few who regained their faces.

HIROSHIMA MAIDEN

By Dan Hurlin

St. Ann's Warehouse

38 Water Street, Brooklyn

718.254.8779

Through February 1

Time Out

New York

Hiroshima Maiden

By Dan Hurlin. Dir. Hurlin. With ensemble cast. St. Ann's Warehouse (see *Off Broadway*).

On paper, Dan Hurlin's *Hiroshima Maiden* seems like a project in explosively poor taste: a puppet show about nuclear mutilation. Its inspiration is sublimely ridiculous. In 1955, a Methodist minister named Kiyoshi Tanimoto brought a group of

25 Japanese women—who had been terribly disfigured by the Hiroshima bombing—to New York's Mt. Sinai Hospital for extensive plastic surgery. As part of his visit, Tanimoto appeared on an episode of the TV game show *This Is Your Life*—in which one of the guests was Robert Lewis, copilot of the warplane that had dropped the atomic bomb. This astonishing moment serves as the

finale of *Hiroshima Maiden*, and like the rest of the show, it is enacted through puppets and shadows.

The satirical potential inherent to this setup is evident, but Hurlin extends what might have been a subversive, ironic goof into a delicate Christian parable of reconciliation and forgiveness. *Hiroshima Maiden* is performed in the Bunraku style, with three musicians, nine capable puppeteers in black (who also perform some understated choreography) and a narrator, or *tayu* (Dawn Akemi Saito), reading a few pages of text from the side of the stage. The result is thoughtful and often quite beautiful, with several marvelous puppet effects that convey complex feelings with economy and wit. (In one sequence, traditional Japanese portraits slowly seem to melt into deformity; in another, a scarred woman huddles alone in her apartment as mushrooms sprout unstopably from the floor.) If anything, the production suffers from a surfeit of tact—its leisurely pacing verges on sleepy, and 20 minutes might profitably be trimmed—but Hurlin's imagination is to be commended for gracefully restoring a lost episode of cultural history.—*Adam Feldman*

SIGHTLINE An elastic cord stretches between Japanese and American puppets in *Hiroshima Maiden*.



PHOTOS BY (CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) PAULA COURT; HUGO GLEICHNING; STEVE J. SHERMAN

Los Angeles Times

November 5, 2005

THEATER REVIEW; Humanity, puppets and scars of war **by David C. Nichols**

Fifty years ago, the so-called Hiroshima Maidens, a group of young Japanese women gravely disfigured by the atomic bomb, arrived in New York City for reconstructive surgery. Their sociopolitical saga, rending in its historical context and application to current events, contributes mutely but vividly to the psychic and kinetic fallout from "Hiroshima Maiden" at REDCAT.

By approaching this sorrowful tale from a distinctly acerbic personal viewpoint, puppet theater master Dan Hurlin addresses America's tunnel vision about its global legacy, while he and a selfless company express its still-emerging impact in delicately brilliant terms.

During the U.S. occupation, the families of hibakusha (survivors) kept their maimed out of sight. Buddhist and Shinto beliefs viewed the keloid scarring of these young women as proof of ancestral trespasses. In the U.S., a State Department intent on the Cold War banned images of atomic survivors from the media (a blackout that held until 1964). U.S. schoolchildren prepared for nuclear attack by crawling under desks and closing their eyes.

In 1951, Kiyoshi Tanimoto, a Japanese Methodist minister, contacted Saturday Review editor Norman Cousins about the situation. By 1955, 25 girls for whom reconstructive surgery seemed most beneficial flew to Manhattan. There, a crew of surgeons performed more than 140 operations on the group, eventually known as the Hiroshima Maidens. Their appearance on Ralph Edwards' "This Is Your Life," which Hurlin caught as a channel-switching child, proved historic.

That televised catharsis, slightly tweaked, is the final destination of Hurlin's nonlinear, autobiographical focus. Using the Japanese bunraku tradition as a template, Hurlin turns input from historian David Serlin and peace activist Michiko Yamaoka (one of the hibakusha), into a coolly magical dreamscape.

Acting as the traditional tayu (narrator), Hurlin sits beside the stage, musing on "the young American boy." Beside him is indispensable composer Robert Een, an Obie winner for his marvelous, jazz-flavored score. Approximating the Japanese shamisen on his cello, Een melds with the prerecorded instrumental and vocal contributions of Jeff Berman and Bill Ruyle.

They accompany nine fantastic functionaries in black, who freely control the panels, miniature settings and detailed props of Hurlin's concept. Silhouettes, window boxes and forced perspectives dance to hypnotic effect, aided by Tyler Micoleau's nuanced lights and Julie Alane Simons' shrewd slides. Photographic flashes and fragmenting faces become ominous themes. A tiny kimono (one of many by costumer Anna Thomford) turns a puppeteer's arm into one of a line of geishas, their egg-shaped heads gradually replaced by shattered versions.

The principal puppets are extraordinary throughout, from red-clad heroine to government official to Enola Gay pilot. Such gracefully negotiated eloquence lingers well after the lights come up on this enthralling, sobering shadow play.

'Hiroshima Maiden'

Where: REDCAT at Walt Disney Concert Hall, 631 W. 2nd St., L.A.

When: 8:30 tonight, 3 p.m. Sunday

Ends: Sunday

Price: \$28 and \$32

Contact: (213) 237-2800 or www.redcat.org

Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes

Credit: Special to The Times

arts & entertainment

In DUMBO, Puppet Theater Tells A-Bomb Survivor's Story

By Abby Ranger
Brooklyn Eagle

For anyone who hasn't seen writer and director Dan Hurlin's *Hiroshima Maiden*, it's difficult to conceive of 3-foot dolls that tell a horrifying true story about an atomic bomb survivor, and do so with awesome grace, intricate wit and gentle humor. The phrase 'puppet theater' doesn't help.

Hurlin's incredible piece, three years in the making, opened at St. Ann's Warehouse in DUMBO on Wednesday. Performances continue through February 1.

The story has been largely lost to history; it's familiar only if you remember the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek* in the mid-fifties. A group of young women brutally disfigured by the bomb, the Hiroshima Maidens, were hidden from public view in Japan, many of them shunned even by their families. Twenty-five of

form with roots in the 15th century.

As in traditional Bunraku, a narrator speaks the only dialogue. The monologues are between the scenes, though, not during them. And rather than giving voice to the puppets, the narrator (Dawn Akemi Saito) speaks in the voice of an American boy mostly external to the plot: a fourth-grader doing duck-and-cover drills, terrified that he might accidentally look at a nuclear blast. ("It's so hard to control. Sight happens in the air, like electricity," he thinks, "... and it can kill you.")

In place of traditional Bunraku's single accompanist, composer and cellist Robert Een, joined by two percussionists, performs his original music.

Hurlin also bends Bunraku's rules about how performers manipulate figures. Often, using a technique similar to Bunraku, three performers work in concert to move a single puppet's lifelike limbs. (The mechanisms are poles, not strings.) Every twitch and shift is specific and significant.

A performer might also create a figure simply by hanging a miniature kimono from one arm and dancing.

In other scenes, the performers step into the action and become characters themselves. A white labcoat over a neutral black costume turns a performer into a doctor nearly twice as tall as his puppet patient. When a row of performers falls together, smacks the floor, and sends the Maiden puppet reeling, it is the shockwave of the nuclear blast.

Telling a story mostly without spoken language, Hurlin employs an intuitively understood symbolic language, imaginative and elaborate but remarkably clear and efficient. The staging stretches strings between puppets' eyes when they see each other, or when a crowd of puppets stare at the disfigured Maiden. It focuses the audience's gaze on details with a battery of swinging arrows on sticks.

If a puppet's tiny key or knife is significant, a performer holds a magnifying glass in front of the object, and a giant paper cut-out version appears on a glowing panel upstage, backlit in silhouette.

When a puppet's camera clicks, two strings extend from the subject to a point labeled 'lens,' more strings indicate the inverse path to the refracted negative, then an arrow points across the stage from the negative to a developing tray. A puppet photographer swirls the chemicals, then up flips a picture of a woman with a horribly scarred face.

Then — as if that weren't already enough to amaze everyone — the picture melts and bleeds. Pieces of her face just fall off and dangle on strings.

Michiko Yamaoka, a former Maiden, now in her 70s, whom Hurlin interviewed in Hiroshima before he wrote the play, sat in the audience at St. Ann's on opening night. After the performance, she answered the audience's questions through a translator, calling the puppetry "really honest," expanding on the story of the Maidens' interaction with the pilot, and expressing her hope that Hurlin brings his production to Hiroshima.

Ms. Yamaoka will appear after the performance again on Sunday, January 18.

St. Ann's Warehouse is 38 Water Street. Performances are Wednesdays through Saturdays at 8 p.m. and Sundays at 4 p.m. Tickets, \$25 each, are available by phone (718) 254-8779, in person at St. Ann's box office, or at ticketweb.com.



Writer and director Dan Hurlin is also the director of Arts at St. Ann's Puppet Lab. Photo by Steve J. Sherman

them came to New York in 1955 desperate for plastic surgery.

According to program notes by historian David Serlin, before the women's visit, the U.S. State Department had censored all images of nuclear bomb victims from American popular media. When they thought of Hiroshima, the vast majority of Americans pictured a flattened landscape, not mangled faces.

For more than a year between '55 and '56, as the Hiroshima Maidens underwent reconstructive surgery in Manhattan, press pursued them. Perhaps the most bizarre media event, and one that Hurlin's new production dramatizes in great detail, was an episode of the TV show "This Is Your Life" when one of the Maidens was brought face to face with the co-pilot of the Enola Gay, the plane that dropped the bomb.

Hurlin's previous work in theater earned an OBIE award, and he has also designed sets, taught dance composition, and exhibited in galleries as a visual artist. For *Hiroshima Maiden*, a stylistic departure from his former puppet theater productions, he borrows from the traditions of Japanese Bunraku puppetry, a



The co-pilot of the plane that dropped the Hiroshima bomb, Robert Lewis, inspired one of the characters in the puppet production now showing at St. Ann's Warehouse. The play dramatizes Lewis' actual appearance on a 1955 episode of the show "This Is Your Life" where he came face to face with one of the women the bomb disfigured. Photo by Steve J. Sherman

Email letter to Dan Hurlin from the Mayor of the City of Hiroshima

Dear Mr. Dan Hurlin,

I am writing you after having read the New York Times piece entitled "*Hiroshima Bomber and Victims: This Is Your (Puppet's) Life.*"

Hiroshima, which experienced the tragedy of the world's first atomic bombing 59 years ago, recovered because of the tireless efforts of its citizens and generous assistance from around the world. Through the assistance of Norman Cousins, Reverend Kiyoshi Tanimoto, and others, the "Hiroshima Maidens," who are the theme of your play, traveled to the U.S. to undergo cosmetic surgery. Not only were the Hiroshima Maidens' bodily injuries alleviated, but they regained hope for the future and trust in people.

The healing of not only physical but emotional scars through warm hands extended from Japan and abroad is a wonderful message about Hiroshima's despair and recovery. We still cherish that memory in our heart. (Here is the link to my letter of condolence to New York City after the 2001 September 11 terrorist attacks, which touches on this subject.

<http://www.city.hiroshima.jp/shimin/heiwa/stateents-terro.html>) Because of this warm human interchange with people around the world, the hibakusha were able to break the cycle of hatred and violence and join with many citizens of the United States and other countries to work to abolish nuclear weapons and create true peace.

Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the hibakusha and other peace-seeking people, massive nuclear weapons remained stockpiled on the earth and the danger that they might be used is growing. Concerned about the fading memory of what happened 59 years ago, Hiroshima is working to help the youth of the world inherit the facts about the bombing and the powerful will of the hibakusha, who vowed not to allow the evil to be repeated.

In that context, I find quite significant your performance of *Hiroshima Maiden*, which speaks of the importance of reexamining history and employs the traditional Japanese artistic medium of bunraku. I wish you success from my heart. I hope that many U.S. citizens and other people will see *Hiroshima Maiden* and join us in praying, speaking, and acting daily to bring a nuclear-free world of peace released from hatred and fear.

Tadatoshi Akiba
Mayor
The City of Hiroshima

The New York Times

Arts & Leisure

Sunday, January 11, 2004



"Hiroshima Maiden," based on an encounter between a pilot of the plane that dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and survivors of the blast, is performed in bunraku style. Matthew Acheson, top, and Nami Yamamoto manipulated a puppet at St. Ann's Warehouse.

Steve J. Schmitt

Hiroshima Bomber and Victims: This Is Your (Puppet's) Life

By DAVID HAKOFF

In 1965, a group of 25 Japanese girls and young women who had been disfigured by the effects of the atomic blast in Hiroshima were flown to New York City to undergo reconstructive surgery at Mount Sinai Hospital. They were accompanied on their trip by the Rev. Ayaoka Yamamoto, a Methodist minister in Hiroshima.

The performance artist and director Dan Hurin first heard of the Hiroshima children, as they were called in the press, from a friend, the Hudson David Serlin, who came upon their story while researching a book. Mr. Hurin couldn't get it out of his head.

What struck him in particular was a detail that seems a familiar one enough out of Kurt Vonnegut, or would, but for the existence of archival television film with its New York, Tennessee, along with his wife and children and some of the women, appeared on the television show "This Is Your Life." There they met face to face with Capt. Robert Lewis, the captain of the *Enola Gay*, the B-29 that had dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima 19 years before.

According to Mr. Hurin, Lewis was not initially told that he would be meeting with survivors, before the taping began, he realized what the producers had in mind and fled the studio. He was later found at a bar.

Despite that interruption, the encounter proceeded as planned. A brief clip of the program, which survives in a Hiroshima documentary titled "After the Cloud Lifted," shows a monumentally awkward meeting, with all parties civil and subdued.

Lewis is a barrel-chested man in a light-colored jacket, the prominent nose casting his eyes in shadow. He describes the events of Aug. 6, 1945, while Yamamoto nods as if in conversation with him. "At 8:15 promptly, the bomb was dropped," he says. He goes on: "Shortly after we turned back to see what had happened. And there, in front of our eyes, the city of Hiroshima disappeared. I walked down later, and there Lewis takes his finger to his chest, his forehead, as he fights for composure, his voice almost faltering: "My God. What have we done?"

Mr. Hurin was "blacked-out" with minimal "at the story." "I started to think about cultural reconciliation," he explained recently by e-mail. "I was never really clear to me how to translate — Germany, for instance — can differ

wooly, "say their part." As he pitched over that issue, he started to formulate a play. ("I have three or four ideas percolating at the time," he said. "The idea that bubbles to the surface most often is the one I often end up making.")

He filled up nearly two notebooks with sketches and ideas, read widely and immersed himself in visual research, studying the work of Japanese wood block printmakers like Hiroshige and Eitoku, and the Japanese influence on the mid-20th-century architecture and furniture of Charles and Ray Eames. And in search of an 8-millimeter copy of the complete "This Is Your Life" broadcast, in July 2001 he went all the way to the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum.

He didn't last the film, but he did meet

performance art, at Sarah Lawrence College — explanation in an interview last month at a dinner in Danville. "They're immediately more engaging to me than a live actor. You watch an actor wipe his nose and think nothing of it. You see a puppet do it and you say, 'I know that!' What surprises everyone is how expressive they are. But what's really going on is an act of projection. The audience will use their imaginations to fill in the missing steps. Performance is a very easy street. It's what you read that it."

Such universality might account for a proliferation of Object Theater pieces ("The new, cool puppetry jargon," according to Mr. Hurin) in the Hershberg musical "Avenue Q" and Paula Vogel's play "The Long Christmas Ride Home" — the films "Spring, Jean Maddeaux" and "Harambee." Mr. Hurin confesses to some wariness on this point: "In a little shopaholic saying all this because I'm fairly new to the form. Forget me for rolling, my eyes. I'm worried that puppetry is becoming the new black, but I am thankful that it's on the radar."

In traditional theater, the voices of the puppet are spoken and sung by the Taysu, a narrator who also provides exposition and commentary. The Taysu in "Hiroshima Maiden" will tell the story of Michiko and the Pilot, but rather a seemingly unrelated narrative of an American boyhood from 1955. Anything but a consoling look back at that era, it bears out, instead, the first line of the program notes, written by Mr. Serlin: "Americans love nostalgia but they hate history."

The Taysu describes a world suffused with anxiety: the Boy opening his eyes during Deck and Cover drills at school; manifested by the flashing unbalance lights at a traffic accident; obsessing over the myth of the Medusa and the fate of all those who gaze upon her. Every new experience is fraught with pitfalls and humiliations, there for the stressing. Even the antics of Lucy Ricardo are almost too much for the Boy to bear. ("The car which any episode three quarters of the way through the car watch her come up with a great cool-saving idea... or even how to get a job in a candy factory... But what he can't stand to watch is what happens when her plan is put into action. He doesn't want to see that. Who would want to see that? That's not funny. It's embarrassing.")

The wages of seeing are a long-standing theme in Mr. Hurin's work. The previous two pieces fell under the collective title "Everything Has Its Slight." One dealt with looking as a form of refuge, telling the story of the town battles. Mr. Hurin in an effort to avoid the town battles, Mr. Hurin

stepped inside, peering through art books. "The other piece," he said, "was about looking at danger, equating architecture with sex. When I was growing up in Ashford, N.H., I got the neighborhood boys — those same buddies, a few years later — "to build one a clubhouse with a bunk bed room. There was some construction involved. I was hoping that the hot day would make them take their shirts off. They never did, but," he added, embarrassed, "they dug me that much more than now."

"Hiroshima Maiden," then, might be a meditation on looking as knowledge. Not the know-ledge that brings power or peace of mind, but rather the grim, unalterable knowledge of a terrible, uncorrectable event.

The overall consequences of seeing and the fact that one cannot "unsee" something are made concrete throughout "Hiroshima Maiden." The play's many arresting stage pictures are annotated, deconstructed and digested as if one were looking through a book — as analogy text, atlas or technical manual — rather than watching live theater. The puppeteers employ all manner of props to direct and focus the gaze of the audience: arrows on sticks point to an otherwise ignored detail; empty wooden squares on long handles frame a puppet's head or foot; when a toy, glittering, speed skaters across the floor, catching the Pilot's attention, another puppeteer stretches an elastic from the anatomical object to a large white circle graced with the silhouette of an ant; it's like a blow-up of the "Ayes of Detroit" on a map. The crossed faces of the puppet Michiko is subjected to the harsh stares of others. Black-and-white lightbulbs pointed on sticks extend from the eyes of the spectators toward her, an rigid and invasive as daggers.

In rehearsal, Mr. Hurin confers with his cast of nine. The group is a mix of Caucasian and Japanese, as well as professional puppeteers and dancers. "Dancers make great puppeteers," he said. "They have a sense of the body and how to move it, which gives them a greater sense of the physiology of how to move a puppet. Plus, they're better ensemble players."

Since the bankrupt puppets in the production are manipulated by three people — one operating the head and right arm, another on the left arm and the third moving the legs — seamless ensemble work is important.

They are conferring about the play's final scene, making suggestions and talking over one another in a friendly three-to-all stambling around the play's 3-and-a-half-hour-long

co-stars, for the moment unannounced. "When is your ideal ending tempo?" asks one of the puppeteers.

"That they're seeing each other for the first time and can't take their eyes off of one another," Mr. Hurin replies.

The cast members experiment with having a puppeteer stand between the two characters, holding one of the black-and-white sticks denigrating sight lines.

Eventually, they opt for a similarly black-and-white length of elastic stretched from the eye of one puppet to the other; Michiko and the Pilot are taken up by their respective teams of three puppeteers. They circle each other in silence, the line of their mutual, unweaving faces connecting them. Even surrounded by 10 live people, it is as if they are the only two onstage.



Robert Lewis, right, the co-pilot of the *Enola Gay*, on "This Is Your Life" with the host, Ralph Edwards, and the Rev. Ayaoka Yamamoto.

Michiko Yamamoto, one of the surviving Maidens. Mr. Hurin was already immersed in the development of the play, but his conversations with Ms. Yamamoto helped shape the material.

The trench, "Hiroshima Maiden," is built around two characters: the Pilot, based on Lewis and Michiko, somewhat loosely based on Ms. Yamamoto. The play opens on Wednesday at 53 Ave's Warehouse in Brooklyn, where it is scheduled to run through Feb. 1. Ms. Yamamoto, who, last 15 years old in 1945, is now in her 70s — will be on hand for select performances and will answer questions from the audience.

"Hiroshima Maiden" is the first of his pieces in which Mr. Hurin does not appear. Live actors of any sort, in fact, are incidental to the production. It is performed in the style of bunraku, the centuries-old Japanese puppet theater. "Puppets are a better mirror of our own selves," Mr. Hurin — "no reaches empathy, along with don't not