

## CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

# First Up in La MaMa's Return: Strange, Enchanting Puppetry

The daring Manhattan theater reopens this month with a gorgeous puppet festival, proving it has lost none of its nerve during the pandemic.



By Laura Collins-Hughes

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Sonia enters naked, far upstage. Even from a distance, she is an imposing presence, taller than either of the men who are helping her walk.

All right, making her walk. Sonia is a puppet, and she would be inert without them.

Not for an instant does it feel that way, though, in “Lunch with Sonia,” an aching beautiful entry in La MaMa’s annual puppet festival. These puppeteers are her caretakers, surely — because in this puppet-and-dance piece Sonia is ill, and her faltering body needs assistance as she puts on a gown and moves painstakingly downstage toward her grand, gilt-edged chair. Where, holding court, she proceeds to enchant us.

The festival, now in its second week and continuing through Oct. 24, opens the venerable East Village theater’s post-shutdown season. I regret to inform you that “Lunch with Sonia” has finished its run. But of the four productions I have seen in this year’s lineup, it is one of two that made me feel intensely grateful that La MaMa is once again lending its stages to live performance that is strange, daring, gorgeous and far from the mainstream.

More about “Sonia” in a moment, because there is still time to catch the other show that absolutely gripped me: Lone Wolf Tribe’s eerie, wistful “Body Concert,” running through Sunday upstairs in the cavernous Ellen Stewart Theater.

Like “Sonia,” this is puppetry for adults — ideally the non-squeamish kind, given that a small herd of severed body parts is involved. They are made of foam rubber, but still.



Kevin Augustine in “Body Concert.” Richard Termine

Kevin Augustine, who created this Butoh-inspired puppetry-and-movement piece, performs it clad in a dance belt, with his hands, feet and head colored greasepaint white. In mostly dim, hazy lighting, by Ayumu “Poe” Saegusa, Augustine animates an outsize skull; an enormous eye; and a giant, skin-stripped arm and leg, each a mass of muscles and veins. There’s a heart, too, and a jaw, and a semi-skeleton infant with an unclosed fontanel.

I can't tell you quite why it's so fascinating to watch the leg use its knee and toes to inch across the floor, or just what makes it slightly poignant — though when Mark Bruckner's music introduces piano, a note of longing enters. Comical as it is when the arm, with taloned fingers, tap-taps at the skull, there's an element of yearning there, too. These disparate bits of body, little good on their own, want to be united. Want to be alive.

Sonia, on the other hand, wants to be dead. That is the tension inside Loco7 Dance Puppet Theater Company's celebratory "Lunch with Sonia," whose matriarch heroine intends to end her life before debilitation takes that choice away. But first, we learn in voice-overs, she will have a month of goodbyes, some with family members who are still trying to talk her out of it.

Created and directed by Federico Restrepo and Denise Greber — with choreography and puppet, lighting, video and set design by Restrepo — "Sonia" lifts a grief-tinged tale to a joyous realm, with Sonia at the center, eager to dance in hot pink Crocs. The piece is inspired by Restrepo's experience with his own aunt Sonia, and it is understandably a bit longer than it needs to be: a result of the fond wish of the living to resurrect our lost beloveds and linger in their company.

The other two festival shows I saw, both in the more intimate downstairs theater, were less successful. The first, Watoku Ueno's shadow-puppet piece "The Tall Keyaki Tree" (whose run has ended), is visually and aurally alluring, with live music by Shu Odamura. But the story — inspired by the Koda Rohan novella "The Five-Storeyed Pagoda," about a carpenter who builds a pagoda with wood from a tree he loved as a child — is soporific.



Shoshana Bass in "When I Put On Your Glove," which she created based on her father's puppetry. Richard Termine

Sandglass Theater's "When I Put On Your Glove," which continues through Sunday, has an affecting premise. Created and performed by Shoshana Bass, it is a tribute to her puppeteer father, Eric Bass, and an exploration of artistic legacy. Using four of his puppets, she re-enacts some of his best known works, but she has not found a way to spark them with life.

Directed by Gerard Stropnick, with design and construction by Shoshana Bass's mother, Ines Zeller Bass, the piece makes striking metaphoric use of falling sand. It also shows us clips of an Eric Bass performance, which are more magnetic than any live element of this show.

Also notable is the festival's exhibition of Richard Termine's puppet photography, running through Sunday at La MaMa's gallery space. It's a lovely survey of the form as seen on New York stages; there is even a brief but robust section on puppetry during the pandemic.

For people who experienced any performances on those walls, the images will be particularly vivid. As a line in "When I Put On Your Glove" says: "What animates the puppet is not the puppeteer, but the breath of memory with which we all fill it." So it goes, too, with puppets caught on camera.

#### **La MaMa Puppet Series**

Through Oct. 24 at La MaMa, Manhattan; lamama.org.