

THEATER REVIEW

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Review: "Undefined Fraction" at the 2015 La MaMa Puppet Series



The 2015 La MaMa Puppet Series continues through November 29.

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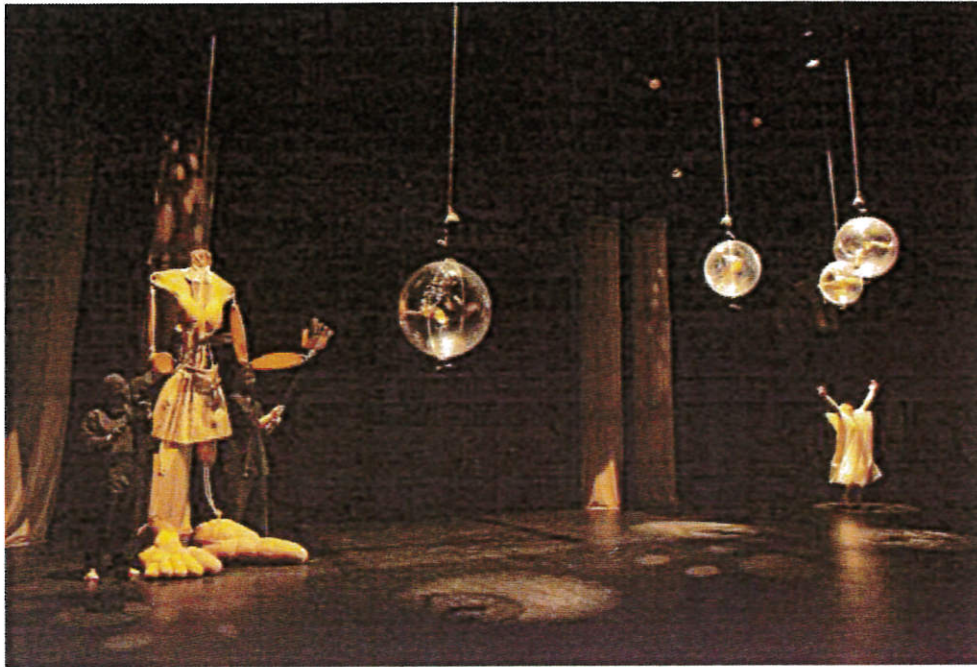


Photo credit: Theo Cote

The broad, vast stage of the Ellen Stewart Theatre cast in blue light, with huge fabric tubes standing upright like stalks of bamboo, a massive disembodied hand hovering mid-air over the musicians in the upstage corner. This was the striking image that set the stage for the world premiere of *Undefined Fraction* an abstract adaptation of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's play *Life's a Dream*, presented as part of the 2015 La Mama Puppet Series in association with Loco7 Dance Puppet Theatre Company. The play opens with a mesmerizing scene entitled "Constellations determine the King's destiny" featuring dancers fit with various lighting instruments moving in tandem to construct celestial arrangements, as a performer wheels around the stage in a recumbent bicycle bearing a womb-like glowing orb on its front. Images of fertility and heavenly intervention are strong throughout this new work set to robust original music by Tareke Ortiz.

This curious piece is a dreamlike meditation on imprisonment, guilt, fate and origin inspired by Calderón's famous Spanish Baroque text. The source material was first published in 1635, as a philosophical allegory regarding the human situation and the mystery of life. This work was co-created by Loco7 company director Federico Restrepo (the production's director, choreographer and lead performer) and Denise Greber (puppeteer and curator of the biennial La Mama Puppet Series). According to the program notes, Greber and Restrepo "cut almost all the original text, deleted characters and even made up a few characters." This loose relationship with the original text is evident in the shadowy plot of the play. Like trying to recall a dream, the scenes are vivid by often vague. The performers, in costumes by Becky Hubbert, fully embodied each moment, but I often found myself struggling to understand who they were or how they related to one another.

The most captivating stars of the show are undoubtedly the dynamic puppets (designed by Federico Restrepo) made from an eclectic mix of materials - soft fabrics, hard metals - in a wide variety of sizes ranging from the petite to the gigantic, and employed using varied techniques including bunraku and marionette. The craftwork is inspiring and the puppeteering is impressive. One could be content by simply staring at the enormous hand manned by a group of shrouded puppeteers pulling strings to manipulate the fingers, gesticulating like the hand of God conducting the action of the performers and musicians on stage.