

The Niagara Guardian, November 27, 1990, Page 8

All aboard the Foggy Train

Theatre Beyond Words presents "Night Train to Foggy Bottom"
at Royal George Theatre. For dates, times and reservations, call 468-2151.

By Sharon DeMarko Gordon

Dream on.

"Night Train to Foggy Bottom" ends as all good dreams do, too quickly.

Surprisingly, opening night performance November 23rd did not inspire a standing ovation, but perhaps viewers had not fully awakened from the spell ingeniously cast by this multi-media production.

A collective creation by Theatre Beyond Words and Coad Canada Puppets, "Night Train" trips through the foggy bottom of the sandman's domaine. Certain wisps of this nether world border on ghoulish, other fragments whisper Freud, a few conjure Monty Python, some are simply, conventionally poignant. Overall, here is the reverie to make one turn off the alarm, cozy under the comforter and recapture subconscious fantasy.

Principal passenger on this high-powered theatrical vehicle is Thadius Steerpike, an inspiration-seeking sculptor masterfully played by Harro Maskow, who lives up to his billing as one of Canada's most brilliant comic actors.

Maskow portrays the only "real" character, the dreamer who infiltrates the mind of the viewer, becoming at one with the audience collectively and individually. Continuously on stage conveying the gamut of emotion, Maskow's is a grueling role played effortlessly.

The rest of the cast consists of masked, costumed caricatures - one an amazingly human-like puppet - cut from TBW's formula of action speaking louder than words.

There are words spoken in this work - an entire, hilarious soliloquy satirizing pedantry - but the memorable language is mime, the non-oral communication elevated to the most eloquent through quintessential acting.

Masks are rigid, yet through these actors' incredible body-movement vocabularies, they acquire flesh-and-blood depth and dimension. Terry Judd as Thad's dad, Suzanne

Merriam as the mother, Charles P. Schott as grandmother establish personalities more distinct than if they incorporated flexible faces and speaking tongues.

Flexibility is a key to Melinda Little's mesmerizing portrayal of the maiden/sculpture. She is as clay, then as bronze, in-between a fine, silvery liquid that slips and glides about the stage, underscoring the theme that this is but a dream. Little's stage presence matches Maskow's during a freeze frame requiring her to stand immobile for what, in slumberland, seems eternity.

For 90 minutes, interrupted by one intermission, fantasia flows as Thad drifts through the surreal, encountering himself, his mother, father, grandmother and other creatures wondrous, strange or both.

A favourite vignette with the opening night audience featured superbly talented puppeteer Luman Coad with Little as a chest of drawers sensually dressing itself. Another sparkler was a rather prosaic poke at culture vulturism rendered witty by Judd, Merriam and Schott as art critics who would make Christopher Hume blush.

As illusions tumble forward and back, up, down and around, Thad's vision of his perfect art work materializes, as does his personal Venus - or do they? Are they one in the same or nothing at all? Creators of "Night Train" have a touch so light, the audience can but ponder what they and Thad actually experienced.

Simultaneous with wanting the phantasmal train to roll on, one wishes for instant replay of certain scenes, particularly the last where Maskow appears teleported or hologrammed into two equally realistic manifestations.

Luman Coad's animation and David Satterthwaite's lighting bring to the stage a technical artistry more commonly associated with films and television.

Conceived by Arlyn Coad, directed by Robin Patterson and costumed by Warren Hartman, "Night Train to Foggy Bottom" conducts a journey into the mind of the ultimate muse.