

Adrift: A Medieval Wayward Folly. By Happenstance Theater. Co-Directed by Mark Jaster and Sabrina Mandell. 59E59 Theaters, New York, New York, November 29 to December 24, 2023.

Upon arriving on the third floor of the 59E59 theatre complex in New York City to attend a performance of *Adrift* in December 2023, audience members are greeted by the costumed artistic co-director of Happenstance Theater, Mark Linden Jaster. Jaster's company is an ensemble-driven troupe from the DC/Baltimore metropolitan area that creates original theatrical pieces rooted in physical comedy and clown technique that in his words "tend to go nostalgic ... look retro" (Chang, Korges & Weber 2017: 1:14). Here in New York, Jaster invites us to write out a question on an index card and place it in the filigreed metallic box positioned outside the entrance to the theatre. I jot down, "Where can you eat dinner cheaply after the show in this neighborhood?" (The Upper East Side of Manhattan is notoriously expensive.) My metatheatrical cheekiness would prove unintentionally apt once the performance began: *Adrift* is a cheeky show constantly acknowledging its own theatricality, while dealing with the very serious topic of civilizational collapse. The world that the ensemble creates for us onstage is a premodern one where the threat of both physical starvation and apocalyptic Hunger, one of the New Testament's Four Horsemen, hangs over a medieval community as it labors together to sow seeds and harvest the crops necessary for survival. Other Horsemen from the Book of Revelations make appearances as well: Death (embodied by Sarah Olmstead Thomas) interrupts the collective reaping with some reaping of her own, while Pestilence arrives as an unseen presence at the very end of the performance to claim yet another life (Gwen Grastorf). Only War fails to make an appearance, unless one counts the inner war we all wage with our personal demons, literalized in an extended comic bit about halfway through the performance by a hilariously flatulent (and sticky) imp from Hell (Olmsted Thomas). The fiendish hellion literally attaches herself to Jaster and just won't let go—in increasingly baroque ways. It is only upon the intervention of a wise woman/witch/High Priestess (Sabrina Mandell), who showers the

infernally creature with loving words rather than imprecations, that this devil and her man successfully part ways.

This slapstick sequence is one of the few that approaches any semblance of narrative continuity, a lack of overarching dramatic structure hinted at by the show's subtitle: *A Medieval Wayward Folly*. As in the Ziegfeld Follies, its performance structure largely consists of a series of episodic bits, in this case built upon sophisticated mime, dance, song, live sound effects, puppetry, and improvisational comedy. There's even a leggy giant strawberry and egg, reminiscent of Florenz Ziegfeld's eponymous girls, and *quite* a bit of audience interaction. These constantly shifting representational modes are undeniably entertaining and surprising, and as in vaudeville, if one sequence doesn't engage you, something completely different will emerge in the performance to take its place. However, this structure also generates moments that suggest the potential for longer and more complex narratives that never materialize. This was most apparent in the piece's extended second section in which the entire company creates the illusion that they are crammed together in a barrel floating on the ocean. Given the show's title, the image naturally evokes numerous questions that are then never taken up onstage: Who are these people adrift? What cataclysm forced them into this predicament? Did they willingly step into the barrel or did someone force them? Are they headed anywhere in particular? Do they ever arrive? Do they even survive?

Perhaps, though, this is the point: a conventional, neatly constructed plot may be less appropriate to the mysterious, metaphysical events presented here than are the questions they engender. Perhaps the pre-show interactive gesture of writing down our queries subtly prepares us for an experience in which we will engage with the unanswerable. It is also reminiscent of a client consulting a tarot reader or an astrologer, as the posing of a question is almost always embedded in the ritual of selecting the cards or casting a horoscope. This analogy seems particularly relevant since, per the company's website, imagery from the traditional tarot deck was one of the sources of inspiration for the production. Sure enough, the questions solicited in the lobby are later utilized during an improv-comedy sequence centered upon "the Great

Diviner,” an oracular entity played by raffia-attired actors (Mandell alongside Alex Vernon), whose conical headpieces are connected by two spiraling pieces of the same material. The effect is suggestive of a primitive version of electrical wiring, and the inherent wit contained within its springy materiality provides a visual setup for the gags to come. Implicitly casting those of us witnessing this low-rent spectacle as supplicants seeking divine wisdom from the pair, Jaster selects at random a few audience-generated interrogatories. The conjoined duo then proceeds to “answer” each one, using a variation on the classic Viola Spolin “single word at a time” improv game. During the company’s New York run, one of the biggest laughs was generated by the monosyllabic cri de coeur “Why?!?” and its simple disyllabic response: “Because.”







Figure 1. Sabrina Mandell and Mark Linden Jaster share a moment of connection before commencing to impart spiritual truths as The Great Diviner. (Photo: Leah Huete)

Here again, it seems some mystical cosmi(comi)c force is at work uniting the audience with actors in a shared experience of flippant philosophical wonder, one not easily accounted for nor explained away rationally. Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, a word that reoccurs throughout the production's spare spoken text is "mystery," and this sense of existential spiritual enigma (the "why") pervades the production. Indeed, the first lines uttered by the cast, gathered around a miniature circular painted scene of trees growing on the shore of a lake or river, are "As above, so below. As below, so above." For anyone interested in New Age belief systems, this is instantly recognizable as the Hermetic principle of correspondences, which holds that every event occurring on humanity's plane is reflected in the higher realms or by the stars and vice versa. Not coincidentally, the "As above" mantra is closely associated with the Magician card in tarot, and a magician character appears early in the evening.

What grounds *Adrift* and keeps it from floating away on a sea of spiritual woo is the performative materiality of objects often used by magicians and other "retro" street performers: red balls, empty barrels, and musical instruments, including a harp and pipe. There are also puppets, but object performance is just one modality among several, none more or less important to its semiotic system. A rod-puppet bird and fish illustrate the "above" and "below" in the opening sequence, the painted trees move when breathed upon by the cast, and a rod-puppet cyclone eventually lays waste to the bucolic scene. A marionette goat with a single manipulator materializes at one point to nuzzle Jaster, eventually leading him to a barrel hoop doubling as a puddle of water from which to drink, which turns into a mirror, which then transforms into a Hellmouth populated by shadow-puppet beasties and tormented souls. (Olmsted Thomas's ghoul will eventually emerge from this two-dimensional shadow world to torment Jaster.) Perhaps the goat is meant to be a cuddly manifestation of Baphomet (the Devil card in the tarot deck) sent to entrap humans in their own suffering? Collaborating with all of

these material performers (while simultaneously operating them) is the puppetry team of Alex & Olmsted,^[1] best known in the puppetry community for their acclaimed productions of *Milo the Magnificent* and *MAROONED! A Space Comedy*. Their presence as core members of the company underscores the immense physical skill, acting prowess, and improvisatory panache that puppeteers are required to cultivate in their work. It also serves as a reminder that those who play in the realm of object-oriented ontologies are deserving of the same reverence and professional respect as creator/performers as those artists who choose human-oriented ontologies as their primary theatrical field of practice.



Figure 2. Is it a goat at a barrel hoop, or is it the Demon Baphomet about to enter an interdimensional portal? Pictured: Alex Vernon and Sarah Olmstead Thomas. (Photo: Leah Huete)

For this viewer, the most effective and memorable blending of the actor and puppeteer function exemplified by Vernon and Olmsted Thomas, but including the entire cast,

appeared at the very end of the performance—but involved no puppet-objects at all. After Death has left three cast members lying prone on the stage floor, parts of their bodies begin moving independently; they metamorphose first into flies, then into maggots, then shoots of vegetation, and finally a tree and blades of grass. It's a remarkable display of muscular dexterity and a moving reminder that our human bodies are just another part of the material world, subject to the same decay, fallowness, and eventual rejuvenation as all other natural objects, but also capable of the full expressive capacity inherent in any object.

After this playful enactment of the cycle of life, there is a final coda: Mandell leads Grastorf to one of the barrels, seats her on it, and covers her with a cloth. It becomes quickly apparent that she is dying of some sort of illness, while behind her brief flashes of the evening's events play out behind her. Has this entire theatrical experience been the disjointed projection of a dying woman's hallucinatory state? After an angel appears to take her away, Mandell gently cradles the now-empty fabric in her arms as if it were a human body. In this moment, I cannot help but think of the recent COVID pandemic, the thousands of empty beds left in its wake, and the sense globally that our civilization was on the precipice of destruction. I feel gratitude that Happenstance has created something so joyful during a time when we are still collectively navigating the aftermath of that traumatizing event, not to mention all of the equally traumatic events that have occurred since then. From the evidence onstage, it would appear that the company's real response to "Why?" is "Nobody knows for sure" *and* "Because making theatre with talented people you love and respect is the most life-affirming thing one can possibly do in a world that feels like it's coming to an end."

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[1] Alex (Vernon) and (Sarah) Olmstead Thomas, as previously discussed, perform

double duties within the show as Magician, Diviner, Demon, and Death. This year they received a UNIMA-USA Citation of Excellence for *MAROONED!*, and both of their signature productions were supported by Jim Henson Foundation Family Grants.

References

Chang, Hae-Yang, Wilson Korges, and Charlie Weber. 2017. "Essentialism Takes the Stage: Happenstance Theater's Homage to the Circus . 4 July. *Smithsonian*.
https://festival.si.edu/blog/essentialism-takes-the-stage-happenstance-theater-s-homage-to-the-circus?dm_t=0,0,0,0,0, accessed 16 April, 2024.