

**HUMAN.** Written and directed by Nehprie Amenii. Music composed by Martha Redbone and Aaron Whitby with sound design by Joo Wan Park. Choreography by Amparo “Chigui” Santiago, and lighting, projections, and scenic design by Marie Yokoyama. Puppet design and building by Dan Jones and Nehprie Amenii. A *Puppetry NOW* featured performance at the Center for Puppetry Arts, Atlanta, Georgia, January 17-28, 2024.

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Figure 1. Actor Evan Hill Phillips manipulates the Nacci seahorse puppet in *HUMAN*. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehprie Amenii)

Nehprie Amenii’s puppet theatre piece, *HUMAN*, considers a world where human beings have faded into extinction. Detached from the goodness of their hearts, the once-prosperous human race destroyed itself, and all that remains on Earth are the sea creatures living beneath its waves. The story follows Nacci, a young seahorse, in his unwavering quest to bring humans back to life. As a narrative densely layered with African histories, folklore, and spirituality, *HUMAN* is, all at once, an ambitious tale of

truth-seeking, forgiveness, atonement, and, ultimately, redemption.

Written and directed by Brooklyn-based artist Nehprie Amenii, *HUMAN* is a multimedia puppet theatre performance piece, originally produced in North Carolina at Asheville Creative Arts in 2022. The Center for Puppetry Arts' 2024 production featuring puppeteers Evan Hill Phillips, Khalilah Smith, Amy Sweeney, Tyler Kidd, and Latoryah Alexander, was part of the Center's *Puppetry NOW* Artist of Year program as well as its annual *Family Series* performance collection.

As a member of the Center's staff, I attended this performance twice during its two-week run. As a workshop production (Amenii was invited to further develop the play at the Center for Puppetry Arts), *HUMAN* went through minor alterations on stage as its run progressed, however, its thesis remained intact and strong: if human beings become disconnected from their hearts, then hatred, greed, and selfishness will fester and devastate the Earth.<sup>[1]</sup> Amenii described her play's underlying principle to me during an interview: "What is sitting in the bones of [*HUMAN*] is an ancient Egyptian Kemetic text where it says the Heart of a Man is his own God."<sup>[2]</sup> She holds that kindness, duty, empathy, mercy, and love emerge from the heart, considered by ancient Egyptians to be the most sacred organ in the human body.<sup>[3]</sup> Amenii proposes in *HUMAN* that if our hearts become lost to us, our future on Earth is grim. *HUMAN* poses a world in the aftermath of such a human catastrophe: a post-human world of sea creatures living at peace and largely unafraid. It also creates an environment with the puppetry and the set that holds powerful meaning. For example, throughout the dialogue scenes and charming musical numbers, the frequent appearance of plastic, designed by Marie Yokoyama, makes a particularly lasting impression. The fish puppets' bodies and homes are constructed from this man-made substance, seemingly formed in-universe from the billions of pounds of trash littered on the ocean floor. Although we as human beings no longer exist in the world of *HUMAN*, the solemn consequences of our creations fabricate the materials that make up this post-human utopia.



Figure 2. The Center for Puppetry Arts' theatre actors dance with jellyfish rod puppets in *HUMAN*. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehprii Amenii)

*HUMAN* introduces audiences to this fantastical underwater world with a jubilant spectacle of dancing jellyfish rod puppets. The small swarm, each about two feet long and internally lit with small bulbs, illuminate the theatre as the jellyfish dance to rhythmic melodies composed by Martha Redbone and Aaron Whitby. The jellyfish, made of purple, wispy plastic, move with a dreamy delicacy in blue light, often leaving the stage to greet audiences and encourage them to hum along with the festive music. Before entering, guests are offered hand puppets—small fish made of recycled grocery bags—to playfully manipulate, either intuitively or per the puppeteers' instruction during the show.

Amenii wanted these puppets to not only help audiences become participants but to offer an entryway into a kind of transformation ritual.<sup>[4]</sup> By accepting the fish puppets and performing with these plastic creatures, in Amenii's imagination, the human

spectators *become* fish, and, much like the puppets on stage, members of the underwater community. Amenii's intention with the transformation ritual seems to consist of collapsing and rebuilding identity—a cyclical process. "In West African philosophy," she explains, "its general understanding is that a person is not born human. You have to become human—it comes through lived experience, it comes through interaction, that you grow [and] evolve into this thing called the Human." *HUMAN* reflects Amenii's interest in traditional West African theatre: open public events where the border between performer and spectator is ever-changing. "In this case, [*HUMAN*] is going to break down the 'Western Wall of Theater'," Amenii says. "We're going to step into something, a different format of theater because other forms of theater do exist."<sup>[5]</sup> Many theatre forms from West African cultures center storytelling and function as a means of imparting and reinforcing societal values, culture, and knowledge.<sup>[6]</sup> In essence, Amenii appears to have imagined *HUMAN*'s audience members metaphorically stripping away their human skins, transforming into the very fish they manipulate, and, having gained insight from the story unfolding before them, becoming re-integrated into human society (at the performance's conclusion) as wiser, more compassionate citizens.



Figure 3: Actors Evan Hill Philips (left) and Khalilah Smith (right) manipulate the seahorse Nacci and mermaid Yemi puppets in *HUMAN*. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehprijii Amenii)

Once the jellyfish puppets complete their dance and head backstage, the fairly loose story begins with the curious seahorse Nacci (a small, yellow and green rod puppet made of wood, plaster, and plastic) entering and stumbling upon a most peculiar object—an old submarine left behind by the now-extinct human race. In awe of the mysterious creatures who once occupied this ruin, he rushes to his wise friends, Akashi the Octopus (a hand puppet with a plaster/wood octopus head and long, shimmery fabric limbs, operated by three puppeteers), and Yemi, an African mermaid (a rod puppet made of plaster, wood, and thin fabric with textured hair decorated in cowrie shells), who reveal to him the terrible story of humans' self-inflicted extinction. What follows is Nacci's journey to uncover the truths of humanity's character—both the wondrous and the destructive—in order to bring humans back.



Figure 4: Actors Evan Hill Philips (left) and Tyler Kidd (right) perform with the seahorse Nacci and Octopus Akashi puppets in a wooden submarine onstage in *HUMAN*. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehprie Amenii)

As the story progresses, Nacci, the seahorse, must first to convince the Council of the Bottom of the Sea, once-enslaved Africans from the Middle Passage, to approve his audacious proposal to resurrect humans.<sup>[7]</sup> Only with the permission of the once-kidnapped Africans may the humans be reborn. Before the Council arrives, Khalilah Smith, Yemi's puppeteer, crouches on the stage floor, alone and without her mermaid puppet. She looks past us with a distant, pained expression. It's difficult to articulate what the intense release of noise she makes sounds like, but I watched in a pinched silence for about a minute as Smith cried out to someone far beyond the theatre's physical walls, only pausing momentarily to breathe. "It was a calling on [the ancestors]," Nehprie later explained. Smith's vocal performance shifted the theatre's mood as she evoked the spirits of the deceased and formerly enslaved. The calling also provides a reverent transition into the Council's entrance. After Smith exits the stage,

the Council, portrayed by Laytorah Alexander as a human (a ghost-like figure in a flowing white gown), appears before Nacci. The Council grants Nacci's request, but not before acknowledging the pain endured by enslaved Africans and their perseverance against all odds.



Figure 5: Actors Tyler Kidd (far left), Amy Sweeney (left), Laytorah Alexander (middle), and Evan Hill Philips (far right) appear onstage in *HUMAN*. While Kidd, Sweneey, and Philips work with puppets, Alexander performs as the ghost-like Council of the Bottom of the Sea. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehpriei Amenii)

In *HUMAN*'s closing act, Nacci succeeds at creating a new human being—one more sensitive and just than those who lived previously—using one of the Octopus Akashi's

three hearts. As the newly born human lifts its translucent baby head from a plastic laundry bin (appearing somewhat nest-like), we see only a glimpse of its neck and shoulders. The newborn (illuminated from within by string lights) is surrounded by the cast, who watches over it with loving expressions. The performance concludes then rather suddenly with the actors frozen in place, their bodies still, and seemingly holding their collective breaths as the stage lights, once brilliant with color, slowly fade to black. This ending expressed conflicting feelings, like a merging of optimism with hesitancy as if the puppets and performers onstage were purposefully leaving us with unspoken questions: What will life be like for the human grown from Akashi's heart and the Council's blessings? Will they, the humans, progress, or fall back into annihilation? And for the sea creatures who have lived freely, will the humans' return hinder their liberty and happiness? These unanswered questions seem aimed at us human spectators, who will soon exit the theatre doors and cross the threshold back into the human world.



Figure 6: Actors Laytorah Alexander (left) Tyler Kidd (middle), and Evan Hill Phillips (right) perform onstage in *HUMAN*'s ending scene. Kidd manipulates the newly born human puppet emerging from a plastic bin. (Photo: Courtesy of Nehprie)



Amenii)

Part narrative, part spiritual odyssey, *HUMAN* is an intricately crafted puppet theatre performance drawing on various theatre traditions to touch on a wide range of themes. The Atlanta production felt, at times, rather overwhelming, and not entirely served by the Center's Mainstage Theater's spacious expanse dividing the performers and the audience. Presenting *HUMAN* in a smaller, more intimate space could inspire stronger communal participation, which appears integral to the play's underlying interest in ritual, audience/performer connection, and communal storytelling.

Nevertheless, and above all, Nehprie Amenii's *HUMAN* inspired audience members to ponder and talk about the show. It was a joy to hear during the post-show discussions how captivated children were by the performance's messaging, and, of course, its puppetry. In our conversation, I was especially struck by what Amenii recounted from an Asheville performance attended by a large group of children. She beamed when describing a moment where the young audience joined in with puppeteer Smith during her ancestral call: "All of a sudden ... when she made the first call, they called with her. It was never planned ... all the children began to do this call while they shook their fists like rattles."<sup>[8]</sup> If a puppetry performance can trigger such organic community bonding and play, then it must be reaching out to something innate in our human nature.

*Cheyenne Bryant*

Atlanta-based independent researcher and writer

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<sup>[1]</sup> The Trans-Atlantic slave trade, environmental degradation, and modern-day warfare are proposed as symptoms of the heart's detachment in *HUMAN*.

<sup>[2]</sup> Personal interview with the artist, Nehprie Amenii, June 10, 2024.

<sup>[3]</sup> For more context on ancient Egyptian views of the heart: “To the Egyptians, the heart, or *ib*, rather than the brain, was the source of human wisdom and the centre of emotions and memory. Because of its apparent links with intellect, personality and memory, it was considered the most important of the internal organs.” Carelli, F. 2011. “The book of death: weighing your heart”. *London Journal of Primary Care*, 4(1): 86-87. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3960665/>

<sup>[4]</sup> Personal conversation with the artist, Nehprie Amenii, June 10, 2024.

<sup>[5]</sup> Personal conversation with the artist, Nehprie Amenii, June 10, 2024.

<sup>[6]</sup> In *Object Performance in the Black Atlantic*, Dr. Paulette Richards explains that “the purpose of theater in traditional African societies was community building....They conceived of theater as an activity that involved the whole community, not just as entertainment restricted to patrons who paid for seats in a hall” (2024, 5).

<sup>[7]</sup> In an attempt to resist enslavement during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, some captured Africans deliberately jumped overboard on their way to the Americas. There was a general belief amongst enslaved folk that by drowning, they could reunite with their families in the afterlife. In African Diasporic folk culture, which Amenii is directly referencing with the Council, captured Africans who were either thrown overboard or jumped voluntarily off of slave ships, created their own utopian communities underwater.

<sup>[8]</sup> Personal conversation with the artist, Nehprie Amenii, June 10, 2024.

## References

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