

Tales That Crackle With Vitality, With or Without a Puppeteer

La MaMa Puppet Festival and other stage works this fall highlight the power of storytelling through puppetry.

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In “Sounding the Resonant Path” at the Ellen Stewart Theater, Tom Lee’s Woodcutter puppet profoundly and delicately embodies human vulnerability, our critic writes. Richard Termine

In a crisp white gallery space on Great Jones Street, in Manhattan’s East Village, a large wooden box contains a meticulous mise-en-scène: a

midcentury roadside motel room constructed at puppet scale, which means it's half of human scale. Standing on a step built into the outside of the box, spectators can gaze down into the installation, a time-capsule environment called "Motel," by the master puppet artist Dan Hurlin.

It has just one puppet inside — a motionless woman in an armchair in the corner, dressed with almost ostentatious modesty, one dark strand of hair hanging loose from her ponytail, a crucifix dangling from the chain around her neck. On the tabletop beside her, the key to Room 15 lies next to an envelope spilling \$20 bills. On one of the double beds, the rust-orange spread is rumpled; outside the door to the bathroom, there is water in the sink. And on the desk, near the room phone and a stamped envelope, a letter is balled up.





"Motel," by the master puppet artist Dan Hurlin, freezes an anonymous American moment. It can be viewed at La MaMa Galleria through Nov. 18. Zach Hyman

Ordinarily, nothing seems more lifeless than a puppet without a puppeteer. But in freezing an anonymous American moment from a decade that might as easily be the 1970s as the 2020s, "Motel" absolutely crackles with an intriguing, unsettling vitality.

The installation, on view through Nov. 12 at La MaMa Galleria, is a standout at this year's [La MaMa Puppet Festival](#) — for the fastidious detail of Hurlin's motel-room re-creation (wall-mounted bottle opener; wood-grain-patterned paneling; lampshade gone cockeyed; Bible, of course) but also because it poses a challenge beyond puppetry's usual ask that we conspire in the illusion. Hurlin and his sound designer, the superb Dan Moses Schreier, are inviting us to take in their clues and envision a story as well.

From the clock radio on the bedside stand, we hear intermittent voices

giving and eliciting testimony, but they are from different nation-rocking scandals: Watergate and the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol. What decade is the puppet woman stuck in? Is she in danger or distress? Perhaps on the run? And why does her prim, princess-sleeved dress seem from a different wardrobe than the clothes hanging up?

Dogs bark, crickets chirp, cars zoom past — all in Schreier's subtle soundscape — and we peer ever more closely at the drab little room, imagining what trouble might have brought her here, and what all might be going on out there.

Over at [La MaMa](#) proper, on nearby East Fourth Street, my favorite festival performance of last weekend was Tom Lee's mesmerizing "Sounding the Resonant Path," upstairs at the Ellen Stewart Theater. (Its brief run has ended, I regret to say.)

The principal character is a puppet called the Woodcutter. Entering with an ax slung over one plaid-shirted shoulder, he walks slowly and deliberately along a curving wooden track, ostensibly alone. Never mind the puppeteer (Lee) seated just behind him, dressed in black and scooting along on a small, wheeled box. That is part of the Japanese [kuruma ningyo](#) style, a relative of bunraku.

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This charming, funny Woodcutter fells trees to carve and shape; in his studio, we see him transform blocks of wood into art. (Eventually, we also see him carrying an actual flaming torch, which is one way of getting us to worry about a puppet's mortality, even if that is not the point.)

Solitary and self-sufficient, the Woodcutter is possessed of the ineffable quality — a kind of projectability — that can make puppets profound and delicate vessels for embodying human vulnerability. His is the microcosmic life at the center of the show's macrocosmic evocations.

Because what "Sounding the Resonant Path" sets out to do is briefly, bountifully recap all of our planetary history. Its inspiration is the August 1977 launch of the [Voyager 2 space probe](#), which carried the golden record of images, speech and music meant to explain Earth to any extraterrestrial life.

Maria Camia's ambitious musical, "The Healing Shipment," features extraterrestrial puppets whose torsos frame the faces of the puppeteers inside. Richard Termine

This show's version includes minimal speech but many intricate projections (by Chris Carcione) and shadow puppets (by Linda Wingerter), as well as live music (by Ralph Samuelson, Perry Yung, Julian Kytasty and Yukio Tsuji) whose bandura, drums and haunting shakuhachi flute reach in and grab you by the soul. To mimic exquisitely the deep, shivery sound of rushing water, the show uses the "Rain Making Machine," a kinetic artwork by La MaMa's longtime resident set designer [Jun Maeda](#), who died of Covid in April 2020 and to whom the production is dedicated.

The cavernous Ellen Stewart Theater is an excellent space for contemplating vastness — of space, of time — but Lee and his Woodcutter

do it especially affectingly, under an impossibly huge, star-pricked sky. (Lighting is by Federico Restrepo.) There is, at show's end, a clear and lingering consciousness of being minuscule in the universe, and terribly, beautifully human.

Puppet-wise, New York is having a strong fall. Up at City Center, in Manhattan Theater Club's production of Qui Nguyen's "[Poor Yella Rednecks](#)," winsome child-size puppets (by David Valentine) play a principal character named Little Man — more than one being necessary to pull off a comic action sequence in particular.

Later this month, at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, the venerable Handspring Puppet Company — known for "[War Horse](#)" and [Little Amal](#) — is slated to return with a puppet adaptation of J.M. Coetzee's novel "[Life & Times of Michael K.](#)"

And there is the rest of the La MaMa festival, part of the point of which is to nurture puppet artists at different stages of their careers.

Last weekend I saw two other shows there whose runs have already ended. One was an ambitious puppet musical, Maria Camia's "The Healing Shipment," whose puppet design was a lot of fun: humans with Smurf-blue skin and shocking white hair; extraterrestrials whose bright yellow torsos framed the faces of the puppeteers inside. The plot, though — involving potato spaceships and intergenerational time travel — was overly complicated and insufficiently interesting. The other was Charlotte Lily Gaspard's "Mia M.I.A.," a work-in-progress shadow-puppet musical with some very clever 3-D puppets. Coincidentally, it also had a space-travel theme, making the shows three for three on that.

Of all the elements for puppet pieces to have in common — outer space, really? Makes a person want to hunker down in some retro motel room and listen to the radio.

La MaMa Puppet Festival

Through Nov. 18 at La MaMa and La MaMa Galleria, Manhattan;
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