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A Decade of Puppets in Organized Chaos

Manual Cinema, a Chicago arts collective, is highlighting four of its productions — vivacious hybrids of film and theater — in a virtual retrospective.

By Nancy Coleman

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A Manual Cinema show can often feel like two performances at once.

Look up during any of its productions, and you'll find a screen where a polished projection of the story unfolds: figures dancing across the frame in silhouette, usually in the absence of any words, spinning a clear narrative into view.

But down below is where the real action happens. The ensemble — which usually includes the founders and artistic directors of the Chicago-based cinema, Drew Dir, Sarah Fornace, Ben Kauffman, Julia Miller and Kyle Vegter — are pulling the strings (often literally) in full view of the audience. There's an organized chaos of actors, musicians, several overhead projectors, cameras, maybe a green screen and roughly several hundred puppets, all on display in real time.

"It's kind of like watching an animated film," Kauffman said, "but all of the elements are performed live."

After a decade of molding and expanding their art form — a puppetry-infused hybrid of film and theater — the members of Manual Cinema are looking back with a virtual 10th anniversary retrospective (or a "retrospectacular," as the group is calling it). We explored the four shows Manual Cinema is featuring on its website, in chronological order, starting Monday and running through Aug. 23, and how the artistry used to create each has evolved. (Dates are subject to change.)

"Lula Del Ray" (2012)

The retrospective's first show, which premiered in 2012 and was filmed in North Branch, N.J., in 2016, tells an inventive, dreamlike coming-of-age story set in the 1950s American Southwest.

As one of Manual Cinema's earliest productions, "Lula Del Ray" helped to establish some of the ensemble's signature techniques: hundreds of shadow puppets on display through multiple projectors, actors performing in silhouette onscreen, and an ethereal (in this case, Roy Orbison-inspired) live score.

The company has since added other technical elements to its productions: In "The End of TV," for example, actors come in front of the camera, and "No Blue Memories" has a more verbose script. But even in those earlier days, with fewer bells and whistles to juggle, the performers wore multiple hats. Miller, who conceived "Lula Del Ray" and designed the masks for actors in silhouette, performed as both a puppeteer and Lula's mother in the original cast.

"It attracts a very specific type of performer who really enjoys multitasking," Miller said. "Once the show starts, you just go. There's no offstage time. You're a technician; you're a camera operator; you're a cinematographer; you might even be doing lighting; and then you're also acting and doing puppetry as well. It's a lot of patting your head and rubbing your stomach."

"The End of TV" (2017)

Between the flashy commercials and QVC-like broadcasts that appear on a screen above the stage is a deeper story, written by Vegter and Kauffman, that chronicles the parallel lives of two former autoworkers in a Midwestern town. "The End of TV" premiered in 2017 in New Haven, Conn., and was filmed at the Chopin Theatre in Chicago the next year.

"We started working on the piece right before the 2016 election and finished it after," Vegter said. "I think we were kind of searching for how we got here — how did the country get to this place of rampant consumerism, and a place where a reality TV star can be elected president?"

The show, like all Manual Cinema productions, has gone through several iterations since its premiere. By nature of the medium — which is usually faceless, and almost always wordless — it often takes getting the story in front of an audience for the company to figure out what clicks and what points people may be missing.

"To tell really nuanced, powerful stories that don't involve language or characters speaking to each other is a really difficult task," Vegter said.

For "The End of TV," Vegter said, the company collected audience surveys after the performance and adjusted the production according to feedback. Manual Cinema's shows end with an invitation for audiences to join the ensemble onstage; it's an opportunity for viewers to see the puppets up close and ask questions, and for the company to hear their thoughts and figure out what works.

"No Blue Memories: The Life of Gwendolyn Brooks" (2017)

Manual Cinema is a company with deep Midwestern roots — a fitting group to explore the story of one of the region's and Chicago's most iconic writers, the poet laureate Gwendolyn Brooks. The work premiered in 2017, when it was commissioned by the Poetry Foundation, and was filmed that year at the Harold Washington Library Center in Chicago.

The script, written by Eve L. Ewing and Nate Marshall, was a sharp departure from the company's typically wordless material — but in a story that hinges on a writer and her words, Vegter said, that departure was essential.

The shadow puppets for "No Blue Memories" and other Manual Cinema shows are crafted from card stock, with joints linked together through a thin piece of wire. In the beginning, puppets were hand cut. The group later started using a silhouette cutter that was similar to a printer. They now use both, depending on whether they want the puppets to appear more rough around the edges or cut with more computerized precision.

"It's really wild for us to see the puppets that we made in 2010 versus what we're capable of now, because we just have so much more control over the style and the aesthetic and the detail," Miller said.

"Frankenstein" (2018)

The final and most recent show in the retrospective is Manual Cinema's most complex to date: "Frankenstein," which incorporates shadow puppets, three-dimensional tabletop puppets, live actors and robot percussionists.

The show, which debuted in 2018 at the Court Theatre in Chicago, was also the company's first work commissioned by a regional theater. The filmed version for the retrospective was shot in 2019 at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in Scotland.

"Usually with us, it's the five of us and whatever funding we can cobble together to make a show," Vegter said. "So to have a whole theater staff and the organizational structure of a theater was incredible and I think allowed us to make a show that is just on a different scale than any of our other work in every way. It was kind of like the maximalist version of Manual Cinema."

With that more complicated performance came more puppeteers — five of them, squeezed together around the projectors, fighting a lack of elbow room to get more than 400 shadow puppets up and running in time.

The close quarters demand an intricate level of choreography and communication, usually in silence, to keep everyone on track.

"A big part of that ensemble work is just literal traffic coordinating," Miller said. "You have to go on this side of the table, and the other person goes on the other side, and if you switch it up one night, you will run into someone. There's a lot of meaningful eye contact and head nods."