

Lula del Ray

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I've never seen anything else like *Lula Del Ray*, a hybrid of shadow puppetry, cinematic scenic projections, silhouetted actors, and live music that resides somewhere in a gray area between film, theater, even dance. The company that makes it is called Manual Cinema; I might also call it "live animation." Whatever you call this work, it's visually stunning, remarkably specific in its storytelling and emotions given that it's virtually silent (there's live music, and a few snippets of radio broadcast, but no dialogue) and all the faces are silhouettes, and surprisingly touching, with the poetic gravity of an old silent film, though with color added. While the visual aesthetic recalls cinema, from dizzying, almost Hitchcockian cityscapes to wide-screen pans of a prairie sky, there's also an intimate, handmade quality to the paper puppets that make up the furniture, props, and most of the characters (the two central figures, Lula and her mother, are alternately played by shadow puppets and the shadows of two of the puppeteers with masklike silhouettes).

The first half of the piece has a leisurely pace. It's set among majestic prairie landscapes, where a lone trailer houses Lula and her mother, a scientist listening to the data gathered by a vast array of SETI radio telescopes. (Some of the piece's most striking images are the slowly wheeling telescopes cast in shadow against a radiant sunset sky.) Though interested in space—as evidenced by collages of clippings on her wall, drawings of the moon pinned to the refrigerator—Lula is also a bored and lonely kid, who can't seem to get her mother's attention for more than a second other than by doing something disruptive or annoying, like climbing onto the roof of the trailer and swinging her feet to clunk against its side. Left alone with *Space* magazine and her drawings, and the occasional thread of sound or image she can get to come in on the TV or her transistor radio, Lula becomes fixated on a country-music duo, the Baden Brothers, who sing the appropriately, and ironically, titled "Lord, Blow the Moon Out, Please." She sends her life savings away to buy their record and then, after one more adolescent clash with her mother, runs away to see her idols live.

The narrative picks up steam once Lula leaves the prairie (including some charming comic set pieces on the bus, and then in the big city, where she goes door-to-door looking for anyone named Baden, and over-orders in a diner and then has to wash dishes to pay her tab). Too, the visual style changes completely; where the prairie is full of texture and color and wide-angle vistas, the city is almost entirely black and white, geometric, except for photo-real advertising billboards everywhere.

And if the first third has an epic sweep to, and the middle is comic, the last third is much sadder, as Lula grapples with being alone in a suddenly scarier world, and with the challenges and disappointments that can come with chasing far-off dreams. She may try to find her way back home, but both she and home have been changed in the time she's been away, and the eventual outcome is deeply moving

As a piece of sheer craft, *Lula Del Ray* is almost unimaginably intricate while using old-fashioned technology; the projections are done with hand manipulation of cut-out paper and a set of multiple overhead projectors—old-school, seventies-transparency-style overhead projections—focused on the same screen. Four puppeteers (Lizi Breit, Sarah Fornace—who also plays Lula—Evan Garrett, and Julia VanArsdale Miller; Fornace, Miller, and Drew Dir co-direct) manipulate setting, characters, props, with a constantly shifting set of backdrops and silhouettes, layering in the actual actors working to cast silhouettes on the same screen for some of the more elaborate movement. The effect is of cinematic, flowing animation, with dissolves, fades, cuts, scenes weaving into other scenes, and the quality of the acting—for lack of a better word—is remarkably high.

I feel like I'm not doing justice to explaining how magical this all was, or how incredibly difficult from a purely formal, technical aspect. It all felt like it moved as a leisurely, controlled, measured pace and yet I can only imagine how many sheets of transparency and bits of paper went into the whole thing. It really felt like watching an animated feature being drawn frame-by-frame before your eyes. (They include bits of the storyboard in the closing credit sequence, and it must be a thousand pages long.) All I can say is, I may not be describing *Lula Del Ray* very well, but it's unique, surprising, and very, very cool. Go see it.