

THEATER REVIEW

A Puppet Who Just Wants to Eat His Sandwich

'The Pigeoning,' a Bunraku Play for Grown-ups

NYT Critics' Pick



The Pigeoning Frank is a man with bird issues, in Robin Frohardt's bunraku puppet play for grown-ups, which has returned to Here.

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By LAURA COLLINS-HUGHES

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The office safety manual is Frank's most trusted companion. When he suspects pigeons of plotting against him, he seeks its advice.

"If you're asking yourself, 'Is there an interspecies conspiracy against me and me alone?,' the answer is probably yes," the book opines, speaking to Frank in a soothing female voice. And, really, doesn't the bird pecking furiously at his windowpane look like it might be part of a cabal?

"The Pigeoning," Robin Frohardt's exquisitely rendered, very funny bunraku puppet play for grown-ups, has returned to Here, where it had a brief, successful run last season. Set to a score by Freddi Price, the hourlong "Pigeoning" is a tender, fantastical symphony of the imagination about a man who wants simply to be left in peace, to work at his tidy desk or eat a sandwich unbothered on a park bench.

This is harder for Frank than it sounds, first because of the germs that keep breaking his concentration, forcing him to scrub them from his nameplate or his cup. And then there are the flapping, cooing, threatening birds, obviously angling after more than just his lunch. Dirt and disorder make Frank feel unsafe, so he asserts control by launching a gumshoe-style investigation. Phobias aside, he is no [Adrian Monk](#).

Frank (operated by Andy Manjuck, Nick Lehane, Rowan Magee and Ms. Frohardt) is a two-and-a-half-foot-tall, thin-lipped older gentleman who pairs his black shoes with white tube socks. Under a comb-over, oversize glasses straight out of the 1980s frame his face.

But the show — created and directed by Ms. Frohardt, who also designed the puppets, props and set — has as whimsical a relationship with time as it does with realism. One pigeon wears an old-fashioned metal diving helmet; a telegraph machine appears. So does a foam clamshell, the kind burgers come in, but this one is at the bottom of the sea, opening and closing like a bivalve's home.

Closely wedded to Mr. Price's richly expressive score, and wordless but for the safety-manual text (delivered in voice-over by Erica Livingston), the piece has the feel of animation. If [Wallace and Gromit](#) were neighbors, it wouldn't be a surprise.

There's a darkness to the dreaming as Frank becomes one with his fears, and a suggestion, too, that the real threat isn't the one he perceives. Might those garbage-grubbing birds be on his side?

"The Pigeoning" continues through Aug. 16 at Here, 145 Avenue of the Americas, at Dominick Street, South Village; 212-352-3101, [here.org](#).