

‘Lula del Ray,’ a Spectral Parade of Fantastical Images

UNDER THE RADAR 2017: LULA DEL RAY



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Sara Sawicki, left, and Charlotte Long, projected in shadow in “Lula del Ray,” at the Public Theater. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

So if you add up the two-dimensional and the three-dimensional to create a new spatial entity, does that mean you’re in the fifth dimension? Whatever you choose to call it, such a perspective-melting world is the realm in which the enchanting [“Lula del Ray”](#) takes place.

This latest offering from the Chicago-based arts collective [Manual Cinema](#), which runs through next Saturday in the [Public Theater’s](#) Under the Radar festival, is dreamy in all senses of the word. It tells its story — in many ways, a familiar one of a restless girl’s small rebellion against her lonely provincial life — in the twilight zone between shadow and substance.

As you sink into the spectral parade of images of the 1950s American Southwest, you may wonder at times if you haven’t, in fact, fallen asleep. Should you require a reality check, you can always shift your focus from what’s happening on the large upper screen — where a polished narrative unfolds in a series of animated silhouettes — to the industrious group of sorcerers gathered directly below it.

They’re the show’s own Wizards of Oz, the illusion-makers who ply transparencies, shadow puppets, video, scrims and their own shadows to create an alternate universe. You are in no way discouraged from watching the magicians at work behind the scenes. When the show is over, the audience will be invited to tour the stage to examine the tools of these artisans’ sui generis trade.

But somehow, as you’re watching “Lula del Ray,” conceived by Julia Miller and based on an original text by Brendan Hill, the visible presence of its creators tends to enhance, rather than erase, the sense of an ineffable magic. (The show is designed and directed by Drew Dir, Sarah Fornace and Ms. Miller.) The effect

summons memories of childhood games of make-believe, wherein the lines between fact and fiction blur in ways that made the ground beneath your feet feel scarily, excitingly, less solid.

That's an appropriate sensation for a work in which the title character usually has her head in the stars, the kinds that populate both the cosmos and the pages of fan magazines. Lula (whose corporeal, shadow-casting form is embodied by a masked and bewigged Charlotte Long) lives in a trailer in the desert with her look-alike mother (Sara Sawicki), the supervisor of a nearby satellite field. It's an isolated existence, and Lula spends lots of time staring into the night skies.

Her thoughts are mostly of rocket ships until she hears, through distorted radio waves, the siren call of the Baden Brothers, a rockabilly duo whose hit record is a phantasmal riff on the children's song "Lord, Blow the Moon Out Please." (The show's beguiling original score, which suggests an astral [Roy Orbison](#), is by Kyle Vegter and Ben Kauffman, with Maren Celest, Michael Hilger and Jacob Winchester.)

Lured by their music, Lula runs away to the big city, in hopes of seeing her new idols in the flesh. What she finds there requires an adjustment in her perspective that wittily echoes the ways that *Manual Cinema*, whose similarly fantastical "[Ada/Ava](#)" was seen in New York in 2015, has been playing with its audience's point of view all along.

The production features all sorts of ingenious handmade equivalents for cinematic effects: close-ups, long shots, pans. (Ms. Long, Ms. Sawicki, Lizi Breit and Sam Deutsch are the puppeteers.) Rural and urban environments are conjured with a specificity that evokes the very different, equally daunting vastness of each. Above both, there is always the infinite sky, rendered in a palette of bleeding pastels.

Lula herself, who has the bouncy carriage and perky topknot of a young [Sandra Dee](#), is seen both as a tiny figure amid immense landscapes and as a silhouette mask in ravishing close-up. Sometimes it is Ms. Long's body that gives Lula life; on other occasions, it is an effigy.

After a point, you won't be able to distinguish between the two. It is a crucial part of this production's magic that the tellers and their tale blur into a single spellbound self.