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Fringe benefits

by Skylar Browning



Photo by Jamee Greer

Donna Sellinger stars as Eugene in Missoula Oblongata's *Wonders of the World: Recite*.

Making *Wonders of the World* work

Some of Missoula's best rock shows don't occur at the Adams Center, the Wilma or The Other Side, but in some enterprising promoter/fan's cramped basement. The band will usually be situated under a heating duct and next to a washer-dryer combo, half the crowd will be pushing down from the stairwell, bent over to see where the noise is coming from, and everyone will be fully engaged if for no other reason than there's nowhere to hide at a house show. The atmosphere provides a certain raw energy and communal spirit that make it immediately more endearing than something more corporate and composed.

The *Wonders of the World: Recite* feels like the theatrical equivalent of a house show, so it's fitting that the DIY-flavored, hour-long play is slated for an international tour that hits fringe festivals, theaters, bars and, yes,

friends' living rooms over the course of the summer. Recently, a special preview show was staged—and by staged I mean performed without anything resembling an actual stage—in a local space that had all the ambiance of an anti-meth commercial: an ominous industrial basement accessible only by back alley, with barely enough light to make out the dozen or so invitees in attendance and an air of potential illegality, since the room was definitely not, shall we say, part of the Fire Marshal's scheduled rounds. But

the alternative atmosphere, and the manner in which the Missoula Oblongata production company played to its possibilities, was almost as much of a draw as the performance itself.

The set design for *Wonders* looks like a cross between a yard sale and a children's play fort. For example, an elevated "lighthouse" in the back is made of what looks like broken window blinds and tapestries with an auto body part as the roof. The rest of the "stage" is filled with old suitcases, laundry lines strung about with artwork attached, a bookcase of knick-knacks and additional piles of what can best be described as necessary junk. The illumination comes courtesy of one spotlight operated and positioned by the actors when they're not delivering lines. If the whole setup sounds a little rag-tag, it is, but strategically so.

Wonders takes place on a remote cape in a nondescript part of the world populated by two peculiar packrats and their even quirkier collection of stuff. Eugene (Donna Sellinger) is a little boy with an active imagination who lives with his grandmother, Cora Bell (Madeline ffitich; she prefers the lowercase spelling). Grandmother is a delusional Mary Poppins type, and when she home-schools Eugene on the wonders of the world, she includes some alarmingly random tidbits, such as that all diseases are incurable and that if a meteor were to hurtle toward Earth there would be no missiles to knock it off course. Cora Bell discourages Eugene from listening to the pair's unreliable radio, but the little boy ends up befriending a fisherman/mailman named Wolfram Frybrid (ffitich and Leo Gebhardt share the role), who is the only other visitor to the cape and happens to have a skill for fixing old transistors.

The quirky story fits somewhere between a macabre coming-of-age tale (as it's described by Missoula Oblongata) and a tragic ode to whimsy and isolation. Written by Sellinger and ffitich, the script initially threatens to be too weird to be penetrable—casual references to Ulysses S. Grant and Robespier will do that—but as the story quickly unfolds everything finds its place. The character development proves to be tight and the plot deceptively thoughtful. Even more impressive, the peripheral props eventually become vital—the lighthouse, the suitcases, even a birthday cake are all prominently involved. At one point the space is transformed into a romantic beachfront, and in another it becomes the scene of an octopus hunt. For a traveling three-person play, it's a show with a surprising breadth of Vaudevillian pageantry.

When *Wonders* comes back through Missoula for two shows June 1 and 2—after scheduled runs in Seattle and Portland and before a trip to the Montreal Fringe Festival—it will be performed in the University of Montana's Open Space in the PAR/TV building. Although it's a considerably larger room than where the preview show was staged, I'd be shocked to see anything short of Eugene's feared meteor strike suck the appealing eccentricity out of the performance. This play was designed to be malleable in its anywhere/anytime pick-up possibilities, and, in true fringe festival fashion, the location hardly matters. What's far more important is the quality of the content and, just like at a house show, the expectations with which an audience approaches it. Expect to be fully engaged.

Playing around with the end of the world: 'Wonders of the World' has punk ethic

By JOE NICKELL of the Missoulian

Preview

Totally Realistic Productions will present a new, original play, "Wonders of the World: Recite," in the Open Space of the PAR-TV Building (the Open Space is located in the basement of the building, which is on the UM campus). Shows will take place on Thursday and Friday, June 1 and 2, at 8 p.m. Admission is \$10 general, or \$8 for students.

It's the end of the world as we know it, and Donna Sellinger feels just fine.

Sellinger, one-third of the cast and production crew of the new play, "Wonders of the World: Recite," has just survived the play's debut in Portland, Ore., and she is stoked.

"It went great," she says by phone. "Someone said it made her feel like she was in love."

That might seem a surprising compliment, given the play's content. Written and produced by Sellinger and Missoula resident Madeline ffitich (no typo there), "Wonders of the World: Recite" follows the tale of a 10-year old boy and his grandmother as they celebrate the boy's birthday - and experience the last day of the world.

But this is no doom-and-gloom treatment of the gloomiest of days. The play features birthday cakes, puppets, music and dancing.

"It's this giant, apocalyptic extravaganza," says Sellinger. "It's all very exciting."

The whole thing is couched in music written and performed by Seattle musician Charles Leo Gebhardt IV, who is best known to the world as the bassist with two bands on the Sub Pop label, the Catheters and Tall Birds.

The play's content and irreverent character springs from the long-term collaboration of ffitich and Sellinger, who have worked together on four previous touring productions of original plays, under the moniker of Totally Realistic Productions.

The two first met during their freshman year in college at Bennington College in Vermont. Their stay there didn't last, but their friendship did.

“We both hated it so much we dropped out together,” says Sellinger. “We've been best friends since.”

Recently, ffitc has been one of the prime movers in local independent media group Slumgullion, and is active in the Missoula Free School. Sellinger is a relative newcomer, having moved to Missoula from New York City several months ago in order to work on this production. The two spent most of the winter and spring writing the play, putting together sets and costumes, and the like.

Now, they're performing two of the three roles in the play.

“I'm mostly a writer, but I perform out of necessity,” says Sellinger.

That do-it-yourself approach to theater hearkens to the ethos of punk rock - a connection that Sellinger and ffitc embrace.

“We're really interested in presenting our stuff to young people who don't have a lot of money, who are interested in something besides the familiar punk rock at shows,” says Sellinger. “An independent music scene can only cover so much, artistically. Š There's definitely a nationwide, growing interest in this kind of retro-Vaudevillian fun, experimental theatre that's done in places other than the traditional theaters.”

Given the vibrancy of Missoula's punk scene, and the recent buzz of activity in the local independent theater community, it's no surprise that Sellinger and ffitc found a supportive network here.

“Missoula is a very fine breeding ground for this kind of project,” says Sellinger. “That's why we got together there to get our show together. It's a supportive place to be creating this kind of work and testing it out.”

The trio of performers debuted their new play in Portland last weekend. They'll bring it to Missoula this week. After that, they're headed off on a three-month tour across North America, stopping along the way at three fringe festivals in Edmonton, Minneapolis and Montreal, as well as venues ranging from bars to warehouses to house parties to formal theaters.

“We intentionally made it a versatile show, so that we can perform it pretty much anywhere,” says Sellinger. “We have an idea of theatre that's a lot more inclusive than your typical \$50-a-seat formal affair.”

Minnesota Fringe Festival Audience reviews:

Audience reviews

Average audience review: ★★★★★



"innovative" by john wilson: If you ever crawled under your desk to avoid being blown up by those Russian A-bombs, come and get deprogrammed. Fun with a depth somewhere; catharsis for negativity. *(Posted on Aug. 5)*

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"Now I see...." by jennifer phillips: Wonders of the World: Recite 1. This is the best show of the fringe. 2. This is the best show I have seen in the Twin Cities. 3. This might be the best show ever. (sorry Complicite) 4. Please come back. *(Posted on Aug. 14)*

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"THIS is a wonder of the world!" by fringe fan: This was a great time to watch. We loved the writing, the music, the performances, the makeup, the costumes, and the PROPS were fantastic! We took our 14 yr old daughter and two of her friends. It is so wonderful to find something that has no adult content that is engaging and exciting for teens and adults alike. They talked about it all the way home. Don't get the wrong idea, this is not a "kids" show, but it is appropriate and entertaining for all ages. BRAVO! *(Posted on Aug. 6)*

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"This is why..." by Ronald Ostrow: This is why I go to the Fringe. Very creative and polished, yet quirky. Entertainment that keeps your attention. Starts slowly but builds a lot of energy. Do sit up front, waaay up front for the full effect. If someone should put something in your hand, don't save it for later. It's later than you think. *(Posted on Aug. 6)*

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"Marvelous and Unique" by Reid Gagle: This is a mood piece, all character and setting

with no plot worth mentioning. It takes place on the birthday of a boy named Eugene who lives on the Maine seashore with his fanciful grandmother, who has raised him on unlikely stories that are a fundament of Eugene's reality. The performers meld into a seamless whole the disparate element of Eugene's mundane existence and the lyrical flights of narrative you may remember from their previous Fringe show 'The Superbowl and Other Stories'. It really pulled me in – I waited, rapt, wondering where I'd be taken next. Highly recommended. *(Posted on Aug. 7)*

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"the stuff that clowns' dreams are made of" by Latif Nasser: At this point I've seen this show twice. It is a slice of cake. Your favorite kind. Also, sit in the front row. Even if it means you have to sit in an old lady's lap. *(Posted on Aug. 8)*

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"Today is the First (and last) Day of the Rest of My Life" by Dan O'Neil: Each Fringe, you sit down to watch one show that could not have been made here in Minneapolis- You sit down and watch a group that's been working somewhere else, and what they bring is so breathtakingly fresh that it makes you want to follow the group around trying to get some of those ideas to rub off on you. "Wonders" is that show. Working with their own lights, sound, and garage sale set, the three actors convert the theater into a far-off light house where Eugene, his grandmother, and the fisherman/postman await their final hours. They've found that magical balance of running bubbling text that doesn't quite matter the first time (recite) but keeps coming back and mattering more and more- Bits of plot keep us engaged with who everyone is, and why Eugene got some kickin' new glasses with which he can see deeper And Farther, and the transformation of stage and audience only keeps progressing up until the final moment of the show. Good Luck in Edmonton... *(Posted on Aug. 13)*

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"Go see it, dopes!" by Ruth Alkons: I loved it! I want to marry the girl that played Eugene, or at least keep her around as my special friend. Show features an eccentric worldview that I liked a lot, a great determinism to be random and unexpected. Wish I got some cake, but I did get an umbrella! *(Posted on Aug. 9)*

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"trying to describe it can only fail miserably" by Andrew Gricevich: If this isn't the best thing I saw during the festival, it's at least as good as the show in whose review this sentence also appears. "Wonders" is original and beautiful. Start with the set, a gorgeous hodgepodge that seems to have been constructed with materials from the garage. Though it takes up nearly every inch of available space, the performers still manage to create spaces within it, partly through using every bit of it (nothing in this play is just there for background or atmosphere; everything is essential and well-considered). The text is gorgeous, poetic, funny, moving, at the same time accessible and subtle, and the acting is brilliantly precise, with spot-on timing at all points. I was moved to tears by the real tenderness of the piece, which it achieves not through sentimentality or manipulation of the audience's emotions, but through great care it seems to show for human beings (I can't quite put my finger on this, but it peaks with the handing out of the umbrellas near the end and the direct address to the audience that takes over at around that point). I don't think I've ever seen anything like it. Don't miss your last chance to see this wondrous work. *(Posted on Aug. 10)*

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"What Magic hopes to be." by Courtney McLean: Tears. Tears in my eyes from the absolutely magical, enchanting experience that is this play. You can almost smell the sea coming up off the prop-ridden lighthouse set and the characters' galoshes. "Wonders" is wonderful; transcendent of any other theatrical experience I have ever had. The Missoula Oblongata set out to create their dream play with this piece and they ended up creating mine. Do not miss this show. But I have a feeling that if you do, you will have a chance to see it again elsewhere. *(Posted on Aug. 11)*

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"Unforgettable" by Rick Burkhardt: Everything these three brilliant writer / performers touch turns magical: a radio announcer engulfed by static, a presidential speech on the edge of speechlessness, a bowl of clam chowder jangling like wind chimes, a broom hitting the floor like a whipcrack. Don't let the thrift-store appearance deceive you -- these folks are consummate experts in the art and poetry of awakening, orchestrating, and inventing anew the theater's most

brehtaking potentials. It's old, it's young, it's the end and the beginning of the world. May we never forget it. *(Posted on Aug. 11)*

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"A treat for any newcomer" by Eric Peter DeWolff: You don't have to be a lover of the stage to appreciate this welcoming performance. The word "playful" comes to mind. Some scenes reminded me of the bouncy Schoolhouse Rock of yesteryear. The night sky effect produced both twinkling stars and smiles. *(Posted on Aug. 13)*

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"A fairy tale" by Dave Romm: More choreographed than performed, this show lives in its own world and gradually draws you in. There are no wasted motions or notions. A quirky, magical, adult world as seen through the eyes of a child, full of music and stars. A Shockwave Radio review. *(Posted on Aug. 13)*

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"The Lovechild of Bedlam and Boban" by Amy S: If you're a fan of Bedlam Studio's work, or if you were one of "Please Don't Blow Up Mr. Boban"'s thousands of crazed, screaming groupies this past year, then RUN, don't walk, to Mixed Blood to see Missoula Oblongata's "The Wonders of The World, Recite". This show shares with those aforementioned geniuses their whimsical, junk-art aesthetic; intricate environments of found objects and gorgeous, funny low-tech special effects; and that smile-inducing magical cleverness that, here, infuses everything from the show's concept to its script to its droll, loveable characters. The story of "Wonders" isn't much, and it's slow to get rolling -- basically, a little boy discovers on his tenth birthday that a) the old fisherman he admires was once his wry, nihilistic grandmother's boyfriend, and b) the world is about to end. Yep. That's about it. But it doesn't matter, because surrounding that story is an absolutely dazzling, dizzying array of visual, aural and technical fabulousness to keep you both riveted and grinning like a fool -- from goofy satires of maritime folk ballads, to a lighthouse that morphs into a clothes closet, to a gorgeous moment of shadow theatre, to a needlepoint collection of historically improbable ex-lovers. Actors Donna, Madeline and Pete are multi-talented in their singing, dancing and storytelling, and yet also uniquely authentic and down to earth -- their clowning (and yes, one could call this a quasi-clown show) is in sync with

the isolated, coastal maritime feel of the tale they're telling. There is truly nothing else like this play at the Fringe, and probably won't be for a long time. Do yourself a favor and see this Wonder of the World. *(Posted on Aug. 6)*

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"Delicious even without the cake" by Theresa Madaus: I was grumbling under my cake-less breath that the online description of the show had no synopsis, just annoying reviews from previous performances, but then I saw the local review calling it "Boban meets Bedlam" (as well as a few reviewer's plot descriptions), and I was intrigued enough to take a gamble and a gander. Boy am I glad! Did I say Boy Howdy!?! Because it was a fantastic show- whimsical, but not fluffy. Entertaining, but not frivolous. The intertwined music and excessive props were exceedingly well done. I especially love love loved the umbrellas. *(Posted on Aug. 9)*

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"A heartbreaking comedy." by Lindsey D.: Trying to explain this show is difficult because of the contradictory forces at work in it. It's brimming with cheerful pessimism, meaningful silliness, and grudging but impossibly deep love. With elements to occupy every sense, this is an ambitious production. It's not flawless, but that's part of the charm. A beautiful show. *(Posted on Aug. 14)*

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"Fringey" by Bruce Hinrichs: This is what I recall the Fringe being about in the past. Today the performances are often quite professional and tight. When the Fringe began, there was more spontaneity and raw cleverness and experimentation. This show is very cleverly written, quite sublime and quirky, yet amateurish. That is not a criticism. It is endearing. The show is difficult to connect with in the beginning, but it grows on the audience, and eventually is engrossing and substantive. There is a lot of goofing around, and breaking the audience-performer barrier, but the show delivers a thoughtful, intelligent, humanistic message. In this case, however, the performance is a bit more about presentation than the ultimate messages. It's quirky fun in a quiet, sublime way. *(Posted on Aug. 5)*

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STAGE TRANSFORMS INTO A PLACE OF MAGIC

Fringe Theatre 2006: Hi Yo Fringe Away!

BY JENNY FENIAK

The Wonders of the World: Recite - Stage 9

From Montana comes the twisted and beautiful ways of the Missoula Oblongata and their show *The Wonders of the World: Recite*. Company actors Madeline Fitch, Donna Sellinger and Peter Dolan are true professionals whose characters appeared well-rehearsed and terrifically animated for their debut performance.

The wonders of the world in this colourful play are far from any of the worldly wonders the general population is aware of, or would even guess at. They are wonders that have manifested themselves to Cora Bell, an old grandmother who is raising her grandson Eugene on an island off the East Coast. They tend a lighthouse there and receive the mail by boat from Wolfram Frybrid, who is an expert in radios and fascinates young Eugene. Cora Bell, though, isn't convinced of Frybrid's skills or Eugene's interest, claiming, "What will happen will happen whether we hear it on the radio or not."

Or will it?

The back story about Eugene's mother and other details are a little hazy, but unnecessary in the whole. And memories and shared stories prove life wasn't always so simple.

Once upon a time, Cora Bell had her fair share of exciting men in her youth, from Ulysses S. Grant to Napoleon, and keeps painted portraits of them all in the lighthouse. But after resigning to raise her grandson in virtual isolation, she has grown pessimistic and a little absurd.

I will tell you, the timeline of the piece falls on Eugene's 10th birthday, and if you're lucky you'll be included in the birthday cake feast.

It's a unique and unusual storyline to say the least, and although a few holes are found, it plays very well. The actors are wonderful and round out their performances with amusing dances and songs, which are actually recorded and available for sale after the show.

But the most wonderful part of this play is the set design, costumes and props infused with fantastic imagination and creativity. From Eugene's clams to the stars they sleep

under, the stage is transformed into a magical place again and again.

Regardless of the few flaws, it's a lovely production and well worth its place at this year's Fringe.

Sun Rating: 4 out of 5

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