

# Mummenschanz transforms

By Tresca Weinstein Special To The Times Union

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GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. -- The artists of Mummenschanz are masters of transformation. Not only do they breathe life into inanimate materials like fabric, cardboard and plastic, they also allow them to enact their own miniature dramas. A creature with foam limbs evolves from human to dog to bird, a velvety amoeba finally achieves its goal of hoisting itself up on a box, a Mylar-balloon figure triumphs by popping off its enemy's head. Each vignette tells a tiny, complete story that anyone -- regardless of age, culture or nationality -- can relate to.

The Swiss troupe, which performed its 33-year retrospective show, "3x11," Sunday afternoon at the [Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center](#), has not altered its approach to cater to children's shortened attention spans in the age of the Internet.

Each of the segments unfolds in its own sweet time, and the special effects, created by low-tech manipulation and puppetry, can be as simple yet effective as two giant gray hands on legs twiddling their "thumbs," or a gigantic gelatinous blob hovering threateningly at the edge of the stage before suddenly shrinking to a tenth of its size.

Without music or words, Mummenschanz communicates in the most basic of languages: pure emotion, expressed in the shy twisting of a giant faceless Slinky or the self-satisfied swagger of a giant silver man made of flexible aluminum tubes.

It's astonishing how little is needed to conjure a character out of an object--by giving a Pac-Man-like ball a tongue, or folding a "flying" carpet to create eyes and a mouth. The performers illustrate their characters' changing moods with physical mutations, twisting their wire "heads" into new formations or reshaping their malleable masks minute by minute.

Sometimes, characters are not invented, but simply recognized and given their moment in the spotlight--did you ever notice, for example, that the short side of a suitcase looks just like a face, with the buckles serving as eyes and the handle a smiling mouth?

Some of the skits approach poetry in their poignant distillation of humanity and the human condition: An unfolded cardboard box with slits for eyes becomes an adorable youngster when it waves its little flap arm; two balloon profiles try desperately to kiss but keep deflating, or inflating in the wrong direction, when they get close to each other. A

socket and plug, each atop a black-clad body, have better luck, and the lights brighten as the prongs slide home.

It was moving, too, at show's end, when the four company members -- Pietro Montandon, Raffaella Mattiola and Mummenschanz cofounders [Bernie Schurch](#) and Floriana Frassetto -- at last revealed themselves fully, to see faces several decades older than those typically on stage. The transformations time has wrought in these four veteran performers (whose backgrounds include theater, clowning, dance, mime and visual art) has only deepened their ability to re-create the human dramedy with affection and compassion, with blobs, blankets and Slinkys as their medium.

[Tresca Weinstein](#) is a frequent contributor to the [Times Union](#).

Dance review

MUMMENSCHANZ: "3x11"

**Where: The Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center, 14 Castle St., Great Barrington, Mass.**

**When: 3 p.m. Sunday**

**Length: 1 hour 45 minutes; one intermission**