

Mummenschanz Brings Magic to Mahaiwe

By Larry Murray

Berkshire On Stage

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Faces are putty in the hands of the Mummenschanz troupe.

GREAT BARRINGTON, Mass. — Mummenschanz has changed a lot since I first saw them in 1978 — they've moved on from being people on stage with masks and props to becoming abstract "things" which most often have no head or face. The audience is constantly surprised, not able to make "head nor tail" of the amorphous creatures they create.

In fact much of the Mummenschanz (as in Masquerade) show is based on making "found" objects come to life. Roly-poly assemblages of high-end garbage bags, or giant wrinkled tubes that act like Slinkys are two of the tag-sale items they invest with meaning. Corrugated boxes and gaint shimmering sheets come to life, as does fabric stretched on giant hula hoops. With clever lighting and expert manipulation the troupe of four makes faces suddenly appear, interact with each other, and then vanish as quickly as they came.

Sometimes the head is suggested by a bubble atop a blob but then it floats off, causing the audience to howl with laughter, only to return a few second later. At other times it is simply pieces of oversized fluorescent pipe cleaners or bits of silly putty that tell the story. In the entire 90 minute show there was not a real human face to be seen.

The Mummenschanz show at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center on Sunday played to a diverse audience of children and adults, and as expected, the loudest laughter came from the adults. Happily, most people have not lost their inner child, and have been waiting for a theatrical experience like this to bring it back to life. The show succeeded on every level, and the feat is being repeated this morning for some lucky schoolchildren from the Great Barrington area. Imaginations will be unleashed, and it is more than one child that will view theater and its possibilities from a totally new perspective



Troupe members use bodily dexterity and props to mesmerize audiences in their wordless comedy.

The technical aspects of this show are part of its secret, too. The angle and intensity of the lights has a direct bearing on the effectiveness of the illusions created. Without a specific lamp to illuminate a wrinkled surface, the emerging face would not appear. Thus Jan Maria Lukas is fully a member of this ensemble and as critical as the players on stage. With the assistance of the Mahaiwe's Chris Silva the presentation was of the highest order.

Indeed, for a tightly run small organization, the Mahaiwe has clearly made excellence its No. 1 priority, and audiences return again and again knowing they can rely on Mahaiwe staff (as small as it is) for first-class theatricality.

Bravo once again to the Mahaiwe for picking such a stellar event. Subtle, mystifying, it drew close to a full house, and those that saw it were among the chosen few. People left the theater smiling, and that is what it is all about. Mummenschanz may be a foreign word, but when it comes to entertainment, it simply means magic.