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Review: In Manual Cinema's 'The 4th Witch,' the line between grief and revenge is paper thin

By Stephanie Allen Special to The Post and Courier

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Macbeth appears as a masked and crowned villain in Manual Cinema's Spoleto world premiere of "The 4th Witch." Spoleto Festival USA/Mike

It's a magician's code to never reveal their secrets. Perhaps it is the role of the artist, then, to pull back the curtain.



The performers of Manual Cinema use a row of vintage projectors much like you'd see in a school classroom to create a live cinema of sorts. Spoleto Festival USA/Mike Ledofrd/Provided

The set for "The 4th Witch" is a stage laid bare: A row of vintage overhead projectors that you would see in the classroom and tables laden with shadow puppets and props fill up a solid third of the space. A pair of mirror-image screens occupy the center. A trio of musicians is perched on stage left, just outside the range of the performers. What might be backstage is instead shown openly — and the making of the story becomes part of part of the narrative.

This innovative, energized performance comes from the minds of Manual Cinema, an Emmy Award-winning performance collective and production company founded back in 2010. Drew Dir (director), Ben Kauffman, Kyle Vetger, Sarah Fornace and Julia Miller are behind it — the latter two of whom double as puppeteers. What then unfolds onscreen is an intricate, enthralling examination of the relationship between loss, politics and agency.



The performers crafting the projected shadow puppets are also shadows themselves, acting in front of a screen for the whole audience to see both below and above on the main monitor. Spoleto Festival USA/Mike Ledford/Provided

The production takes its cues loosely from the Shakespearean play, exploring the tragedy through the perspective of a young girl whose home and family are destroyed at the hands of Macbeth, but set in a gas bomb-infused World War I era instead of 11th century Scotland. With nowhere else to turn, the girl flees to the woods, where she is rescued by three witches understood to be the Weird Sisters.

The girl's preternatural aptitude for picking up the witches' tricks is a byproduct of her grief. She rages her way to successful spells with a fevered thrash of her arms, often losing control of her power right alongside her temper. Violence, too, is performed without question. Frenzied memories of the family that was lost flash in shades of red — along with the face of their killer. Our protagonist knows who to blame for her troubles, and has every intention of making him pay for them.

These scenes of murderous retribution are punctuated by gasping, startled moments of waking, blurring the line between lived reality and what exists only in imagination. Fantasy occupies this liminal space between grief and vengeance: whether it's through actual magic or wishful thinking. Grief is treated as a speculative terrain — one that can be morphed and manipulated, beholden to neither time nor space.

And the violence exhibited lacks real catharsis. The complex but loving relationship between the girl and the witches adds a pointed awareness of the transgressive nature of her impassioned actions. Acting as temporary confines to her compulsions for cruelty, the love that binds them is no match for the unwieldy and overwhelming force of her pain. But brutality is not an end goal: it's imagined as her most effective tool for restoring the life that was lost.

The vignettes that materialize onscreen are as striking as they are delicate. Each still is a masterclass in use of space, with transitions that feel true to cinematic tradition. The hand-cut paper puppets are dynamic and expressive, creating scenes and characters that add a captivating charm to the show's tragic subject matter. Actors' silhouettes blend with paper shadows as the characters rotate seamlessly from puppet to person.



Two screens showcase the live acting beneath and shadow projection above. Spoleto Festival USA/Mike Ledford/Provided

The frenzied, embodied performance by these onstage puppeteers adds a sense of urgency to the story they have to tell. Actors duck and crawl, transforming from long-nosed witches to self-stirring cauldrons with an impressive practiced precision that feels no less magical for our peek behind the scenes. The production toys with the definition of concealment — these revelations of the performers' process divulge no clues about the reality of the world we're presented with. The frenzied, embodied performance by these onstage puppeteers adds a sense of urgency to the story they have to tell. Actors duck and crawl, transforming from long-nosed witches to self-stirring cauldrons with an impressive practiced precision that feels no less magical for our peek behind the scenes. The production toys with the definition of concealment — these revelations of the performers' process divulge no clues about the reality of the world we're presented with.

While the characters never speak, the performance is far from silent. The score and vocals rendered by Lucy Little, Lia Kohl and Alicia Walter are so enchantingly and eerily immersive that, rather than drawing your eyes to the musicians, they instead pull you deeper into the story onscreen.



Lucy Little, Lia Kohl and Alicia Walter played a live score on stage, marked with enchanting and eerie vocals, strings and keys. Spoleto Festival USA/Mike Ledford/Provided

Balancing mystery and memory, "The 4th Witch" makes a stunning case for imagination as a tool of resistance and escape. With a complex narrative, mesmerizing effects and deeply felt performances, the beauty found in this story is more than a trick of the light. Audience members are invited onstage after the performance to examine the puppets, projectors and cameras. But the secret to reconciliation is something that viewers can answer only for themselves. "The 4th Witch" plays through June 8 at the Emmett Robinson Theatre.

For more information, visit spoletousa.org.