

'Bill's 44th' Review: Where Are All the Party People?

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Bill's 44th

NYT Critic's Pick

There are shows so delightfully unexpected that you hesitate, when writing about them, to give anything away. "Bill's 44th" is one of those — a poignant, comic puppet play for grown-ups about a birthday party whose guests fail to appear.

Perhaps they had been to one of Bill's shindigs before. They might have anticipated the forlorn tray of crudités, with celery sticks browning at the ends. Or foreseen that he would spike the punch to near-lethal levels, then want to bust some disco moves. With his bald papier-mâché head and thick Tom Selleck mustache, Bill is not, truth be told, the suavest of men.

He is, however, enormously endearing, especially in his jaunty party hat. And in Dorothy James and Andy Manjuck's "Bill's 44th," which had a brief live (and live-streamed) run last week at Dixon Place and is streaming on demand starting Tuesday, he is sweetly eager — impatient, even — to fill his solitary apartment with camaraderie and celebration.

But in a wordless piece that is as much about the ingenuity of the mind as it is about loneliness, getting ditched is not such a formidable obstacle to having company — not once the boozy punch kicks in and Bill's imagination cuts loose.

All head and torso, Bill has a middle-aged paunch that strains at his sweater. The rest of his body is built on an illusion. The hands that emerge from his cuffs belong to James and Manjuck; his legs are Manjuck's. His isolation, meanwhile, belongs to all of us: our pre-vaccine pandemic selves, having to make do for so long without the people we wished would surround us.

Let me stop right here and tell you that this not-quite-hourlong show is buoyant, mesmerizing, joy-inducing — and that I'm about to wreck some of its more winsome visual surprises, which you might prefer not to see coming. Should you read the rest of this review? Maybe not, if you're planning to watch "Bill's 44th."

Because this is also a show about the nature of puppetry, and puppets, it turns out, are all around us. That tray of crudités? Bill rustles through the carrot sticks and finds the makings of a cheery orange friend he dubs Cary. With drawn-on eyes and smiling mouth, this is a guest for Bill to clink plastic cups with. Soon the party balloons get faces, too, and social dynamics come into play. It's only when Cary turns human-size that things get really wild, though, and Bill has a partner to dance with. (Jon Riddleberger rounds out the excellent team of puppeteers.)

With jazzy music by Eamon Fogarty and dreamy lighting by M. Jordan Wiggins, "Bill's 44th" plunges its audience fully into a fantasy that, for all its silliness, leads its hero through stubborn hope and bitter disappointment toward a feeling of comfort in his own skin and an awakening to the world around him.

This isn't the birthday that Bill had hoped to have. But for the audience, his 44th is a gift.

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