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Dark carnival, tempered with whimsy

By CARL HOFFMAN
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Sharmanka Kinetic theater, a bizarre circus where the performers are machines, is currently 'performing' at Tel Aviv's Eretz Israel Museum.

It is like something out of a strange dream – a dream that is fascinating and entertaining, but also dangerously close to becoming a nightmare at any moment. The place is silent and the setting is dark.

What little lighting there is serves only to make everything in the scene look shadowy and dreamlike.

All at once, a burst of light illuminates what appears to be a giant smiling crow, formally dressed in top hat and tails. The crow rings a bell it is holding in its beak. Loud circus music then begins to play, reminding one, perhaps, of an old novel by Ray Bradbury about a weird carnival that comes to town one dark October night and sets up its tents at 3 a.m.

As the circus music blares and the crow returns to darkness, another figure is illuminated, this time a somewhat comical-looking man with shoulder-length hair and a porkpie hat. Suspended from straps around his shoulders is what looks like a hurdy-gurdy organ, which he begins to crank. Instead of making music, however, the man cranks a scroll of pictures of people's faces – a kind of "family album."

On top of the man's head, meanwhile, is what appears to be a small bear, standing upright, cranking a hurdy-gurdy box of its own, and revealing its own scrolling "family album" of pictures of animals. Both figures stop moving and return to the shadows as the music changes and another strange moving thing is revealed – then another, and another.

Bears do gymnastics, fox- and bird-like creatures row boats and drive carriages, and a reclining donkey strums a guitar as the music plays and the dark carnival continues.

The carnival is the Sharmanka Kinetic Theater which, along with the equally beguiling Cabaret Mechanical Theater, is currently "performing" at the always surprising Eretz Israel Museum in Tel Aviv.

Sharmanka (Russian for barrel organ or hurdy-gurdy) is a bizarre circus in which all of the performers are machines.

These mesmerizing automatons are made of scrap metal – one is in fact constructed out of pieces of an old Singer sewing machine – and wood carvings depicting humans, animals, hybrids of different kinds of animals, and hybrids of animals and humans. The resulting moving sculptures look like figures in a painting of Hell by Hieronymus Bosch.

The audience sits wide-eyed as the machines light up, whirl, rattle, ring and clang, each machine doing its "act" and telling its individual story, one after another.

This peculiar circus is the creative work of, perhaps, an equally peculiar artist.

Eduard Bersudsky, 70, was a dissenter and conscientious objector who became voluntarily mute under the Soviet Union's communist regime. What he could no longer say with words, he began to vibrantly express in art.

He created his first "kinemat," or moving sculpture, in 1967. Other pieces quickly followed, filling the intimate

but rather limited performance space he was able to create at his home in Leningrad (St. Petersburg).

On the heels of Perestroika and the generally more relaxed atmosphere of the Soviet Union in its latter days, Bersudsky and his wife and collaborator, Tatyana Jacovskaya, were allowed to tour with the collection overseas, ending up in Glasgow, Scotland, where Sharmanka is based today.

“EFFECTIVELY, THERE are three people in Sharmanka,” says Robin Mitchell, 47, a Sharmanka technician who helped install the current exhibition. “There’s Eduard, who makes all of the machines; there’s Tatyana, his wife, who is responsible for running the company, booking the exhibitions, doing all of the administration and looking for funding; and there’s Sergey, who does all the technical work and is a lighting and sound designer.

“And then there are people like me, who come along and work with them on a casual basis.” The technical work, lighting and sound, is perhaps as interesting as the performing machines themselves.

All behind the scenes and out of the audience’s awareness is a computer program that ultimately operates everything we see and hear. The machines themselves are internally motor-driven, but the motors are switched on and off in sequence by computer. This intricate piece of magic is the creation of Sergey Jakovsky, 30, son of Bersudsky’s wife and collaborator Tatyana Jakovskaya.

“Originally when we started Sharmanka, over 20 years ago, everything was manual,” Jakovsky explains. “There were millions of switches – for sounds, lights, the machines, everything.

“There were three operators for the show. Over the years we installed mechanical and electrical programs for the machines to actually do their own sequence. And then, with time, as I learned more and more about technology, I’ve introduced some computers – not necessarily to help us run it, but for the exhibitions to be less dependent on us. So we can leave them with people to run it without having to teach them the whole show.

“That’s the reason for computers in the exhibitions.

The principle of Sharmanka is to have as little as possible use of electronics. It’s all mechanical, electrical programs, puppets and so on.”

The machines themselves are sometimes funny, often disturbing, and frequently a combination of both. One, called “Choir,” features an elephant and a crow, along with a half animal-half human creature riding on the back of a huge rat. All are ringing bells, including the rat.

A bird spreads its wings – perhaps menacingly – as a hurdy-gurdy man looks on, darkly.

Scowling, angry-looking little hurdy-gurdy men are, in fact, recurring figures throughout the exhibit. Another machine, entitled “Singer Circus,” shows a reclining bear ringing a bell as a human, a monkey and a bird-like creature turn the crank and pull the gear strings of an antique sewing machine.

What are Bersudsky’s creations trying to tell us? Says Jakovsky, “There are certain commentaries that we come up with for all of the machines. Outside in the entrance to the theater, we have the official comments that we made up for each machine. But I can tell you one thing, and my mom will tell you another.

“Eduard doesn’t even talk about it. He says you make up your own story. We try to comment, he sort of nods his head and says, ‘It could be.’ But he never says, ‘Yeah, that’s the one, that’s exactly what I was thinking.’ “Whatever is happening in his head, he keeps private.

It’s his way to communicate, and he’s quite happy for people to make up their own stories.”

The dream-like, sometimes nightmarish quality of many of the creations can probably be explained by the way Bersudsky comes up with his ideas.

“There is no plan, no drawings, no nothing. It all depends on how well he dreams when he sleeps. One day he wakes up, and if he has an idea he starts working, experimenting. Sometimes he wakes up with nothing, for days on end. He says it comes from above – it’s not him making it. He’s just a tool, an instrument.”

The emotional atmosphere changes somewhat as one turns from Sharmanka to visit the Cabaret Mechanical Theater, a few steps away. Darkness gives way to whimsy as we are greeted by a gallery full of what appear to be mechanical toys.

And while Sharmanka’s audiences sit and watch the show from a slight distance, Cabaret invites us to become part of each miniature performance by pressing a button to bring each of the automatons into motion.

Each creation is actually a small hand-cranked piece, encased and motorized so it can be operated by push-button.

Even a child – perhaps especially a child – can make the pieces work.

Unlike Sharmanka, where every fascinating piece is the creation of one man, the London-based Cabaret Mechanical Theater presents the works of several artists.

The current exhibition features works by Paul Spooner, Ron Fuller, Peter Markey, Matt Smith, Lucy Casson, Keith Newstead, Michael Howard, John Lumbus, Patrick Bond, Pierre Mayer and Kazu Harada.

Be prepared to smile. “How to Live, No. 17: Spaghetti” depicts a man sitting in a bathtub full of pasta, practicing the art of eating spaghetti. He coils the never-ending supply of noodles around his fork, leans forward, takes a bite and chews, and then starts all over again. One of the bathtub faucets spews an eternal stream of tomato sauce, the other produces an endless swirl of Parmesan cheese.

“The Miser’s Deathbed” shows an old man about to die, but unable to stop sitting up in bed to check on his butler, who insists on looking into the miser’s secret box at the foot of his bed.

“Royal Wave” features Queen Elizabeth II doing her famous little hand wave as her head moves regally back and forth; and “How Much?!” depicts an accountant, or someone of that ilk, examining an invoice as his eyes bulge out in shock.

A particularly clever piece is “Being Followed,” which shows two hiking foxes – complete with backpacks and hiking boots – walking in single file. Push a button and the one in front turns to see who is following him, his eyes landing on the one behind. Five seconds later, the one behind turns around also.

Strange but hilarious is “Grooving at the Upholsterer’s,” in which a group of birdlike creatures dance in an impromptu chorus line on what appears to be, well, upholstery.

In addition, rowers row on the Dead Sea, a chimpanzee rows in a kayak, a Geisha gently fans herself, and two old ladies haggle over a chicken that one raises in the air – all at the push of a button.

AND ALL of these pieces are ultimately mechanical: Cranks turn gears, and gears turn wheels – making arms, hands, legs, feet, fingers, toes, mouths and eyes move, causing chimpanzees to row boats and queens to wave.

The creations seem to delight both the adults and children who noisily tour the exhibition. Says Cabaret Mechanical Theater project manager Stephen Guy, 53, “I think that everyone like this kind of stuff. And it actually does appeal to all ages, however clichéd that may sound. Different ages get different things out of it.

“So for very small children, with limited attention spans, they just press the buttons, something happens, and they then move on to the next one. For slightly older kids, they can begin to enjoy the mechanism, and there’s a whole educational angle for them.

“A lot of adults will enjoy some of the quite clever jokes, especially by Paul Spooner. We also get a lot of engineering types who look very closely at the mechanism and try to figure out how it works.

“Also there is the quality of the craftsmanship. The pieces by Matt Smith and Paul Spooner show their specialization in craft carpentry.”

What kind of person creates things like this? Is there any sort of “profile personality” that might describe the people who make these objects? Guy ponders the question for a moment and replies, “I would say that the profile is people who like garden sheds [Americans, read “garage or basement workrooms”].

“It’s mostly a male thing, and aside from Lucy Casson, all of the artists in this exhibition are men. They leave the house, go to the garden shed, and make things. I think that is the common denominator for these people.

A big shed to go to, to get away from everything else, and make things.

“These people like to work on their own. They’re also people who have an engineering skill together with an art skill, and that’s relatively uncommon. A lot of engineers are not that good at being creative, and a lot of artists don’t have the hard skills of engineering and carpentry. To get the two together is unusual.”

Both Sharmanka and the Cabaret tour extensively around the world, in addition to delighting audiences at their home theaters. Cabaret has some especially ambitious plans for the near future.

Guy says, “We’re trying to get together a huge show for the Olympics in London in 2012. Something with an exhibition, but with a big emphasis on making, so visitors will be able to come in, sit down and actually start making things. That is, if we can get the funding.”

And, finally, as different as the two traveling mechanical circuses are from each other in terms of mood and style, it is interesting to note that they both have something to say about the always fascinating subject of love.

One show’s statement is characteristically whimsical, the other not surprisingly dark. Cabaret presents us with Paul Spooner’s “Allegory of Love,” in which a handsome, well-dressed man is trying to hammer a nail, which skillfully moves out of the way every time he drops his hammer.

Sharmanka offers “The Eternal Triangle of Love,” in which two men are harnessed to a carriage at either end, both trying to pull the carriage in opposite directions while a female driver holds their reins – one set of reins with her hands, the other with her hair. The accompanying explanation speaks for itself: “A sculpture based on characters from the Italian *Commedia dell’arte* – jolly Harlequin and sad Pierrot. They were competing for the love of Colombine for so long that they did not notice that their beloved one had turned into Death.”

Sharmanka Kinetic Theater and Cabaret Mechanical Theater are showing together until October 10 at the Eretz Israel Museum, 2 Rehov Haim Levanon, Ramat Aviv. Call (03) 641-5244 for opening hours and other details.



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