

Strange Things I've Shoved My Hand In

A Review by Anna Wang

Cabot Parsons's *Strange Things I've Shoved My Hand In* at the Howland Cultural Center took me on an adventure I didn't know I needed, a deep reminder of how beautiful and complicated it is to be human. While I stood in line under the stars of Beacon, New York, I found myself chatting with an eager attendee wearing accidentally stylish paint-splattered jeans, immersed in conversation about cardboard structure building techniques. I overheard the question, "Are you a puppeteer or a patron of the arts?" And I lost myself for a moment contemplating a life so beautifully straightforward and hopeful. I had traveled 2800 miles from Los Angeles for this sold-out show, thrilled to find other creative people buzzing with excitement around me as well.

Once inside, the vaulted wooden ceiling of the Howland Cultural Center immediately caught my eye, the inspired architectural detail a perfect setting for a breathtaking night of puppetry. The beautiful sounds of Bryce Edwards's *Frivolity Hour Tri-OH!*, featuring Scott Ricketts on cornet and Conal Fowkes on piano, piqued my interest by opening with the 1920s tune "Nobody's Sweetheart Now." Then Cabot Parsons commenced his showcase, a total of 11 different pieces, a collection of puppet films, songs, and various styles of puppetry, each connecting to the human condition in a unique way.

His first piece was the film short, *A Difficult Speech*, starring the straitlaced and exquisitely dressed Eugenia Difficult admonishing the audience on the dangers of Coney Island, while *Toy Theater: But Wait! There's More!* poked fun at the absurdity of modern commercialism with a charming tabletop theater. *Lydia, the Tattooed Lady*, sung by Cabot and choreographed by the lovely Nicole Ryan, celebrated confidence and self-expression. We learned about Cabot's early love for marionettes, the inspiring television shows from his childhood, and carnival puppetry that sparked his creative journey.

In *Calling Gladys*, Parsons humanized the villain from Hansel and Gretel, asking whether she might just be having a bad day, delivering humor with a side of empathy. His *Welcome to the O'Neill* video flaunted his perfect integration of comedy, design, and puppetry, while his rendition of *Ne Me Quitte Pas*, with the simple use of a pair of socks tumbling around in a clothes basket, reminded us of longing and heartbreak.

The Crossing, featuring an anxious turtle navigating a busy

freeway, kept us both giggling and on edge, then Gemma's *Share*—a monologue from a blue-eyed sock puppet—delivered a whirlwind of emotions in mere minutes. The *Frivolity Tri-OH!* returned between puppet pieces, providing musical interludes that acted as emotional palate cleansers. And when the charismatic Matt Sorensen invited the audience to sing along to "Rainbow Connection," it turned those few minutes

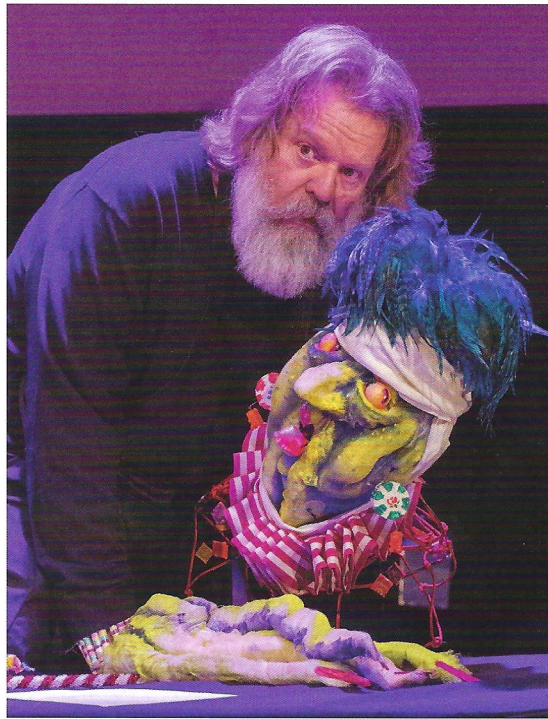
into a collective "holy moment in the Church of Puppetry." *Union Break for the Grim Reaper* gave us a fresh look into how the other side lives, *Souris et Chat* was a suspenseful and visually stunning film on desire, while the minimalist exploration of perspective in *The Mountain: Five Postcards* used beautifully crafted props and sparse dialogue to transport us.

It was a thrilling roller coaster ride of perspectives: from a turtle's view five inches off the ground, to the top of the Himalayas, encountering the privilege of peeking into one's most vulnerable moments to exploding into uproarious laughter the next minute. The evening was a magical *gesamtkunstwerk*—a "complete artwork" blending various art forms—where practically all my senses were engaged. My eyes feasted on all of Cabot's meticulously handcrafted puppets; I was wrapped in a cozy blanket of beautiful sounds and perfectly curated words. His puppets

shined a light into our hearts by asking provoking questions, then tickling funny bones, and consistently closing out with a delightful turn that made me gasp in admiration. I left feeling refreshed and awestruck at his dexterity in captivating an audience's attention and taking them on a journey, something I hope to do in my own work. And just so we're clear, Cabot Parsons is a puppeteer/theater artist and patron saint of the Church of Puppetry. He ended the evening with a reminder: "If ever you need your spirits lifted, attend a puppet show." I'd like to add, "And if it's a Cabot Parsons show, RUN, don't walk to a front row seat."

Cabot Parsons's sold-out show, *Strange Things I've Shoved My Hand In*, was performed on September 14, 2024 at The Howland Cultural Center in Beacon, New York.

Anna Michelle Wang is a singer and actor based in Los Angeles. She is currently developing her Emerging Artist piece from the O'Neill National Puppetry Conference into a full-length musical called *Sandwiched*.



Cabot Parsons performs one of the things he shoved his hand in. Photo: Richard Termine