



## **Le Cirque Orphelin: World Class Theater in Québec**

a review by **Andrew Periale**

When I am at a puppet festival, I know that I am going to see a lot of shows in a short period of time, and I tend to get a little fussy; I wait for that one show that blows me away – a performance for which I do not need to make allowances, or equivocate in my praise. In my week at FIAMS, that show was Le Cirque Orphelin by Les Sages Fous.

FIAMS – the Festival International des Arts de la Marionnette à Saguenay – is a week-long event in which each day is filled from morn to midnight (and beyond) with puppet shows, exhibits, panel discussions, demonstrations, street performance and a great deal of feasting and merrymaking.

I was there (as I had been in 2017) representing Puppetry International magazine and, informally, UNIMA-USA, and the days were filled with wonderful work. Even performances that I felt had not quite hit the mark, or for which I was not really the intended audience, were nonetheless full of good ideas, gorgeous puppets or clever staging. A few shows, however, were thoroughly satisfying, and while these tended, for me, to be the shows designed for adult audiences (Dave Espinosa's *My Great Work*, Los Ladrones de Quinotos's *Hervé's Voyage*), family shows such as Duda Paiva's *Monsters*, and Eugenio Navarro's *Variation on the Pulcinella* theme – *Rutinas* – were also dazzling.

Le Cirque Orphelin (Orphan Circus) by Les Sages Fous was the last show of the day (10:30PM) at the Espace Côté-Cour, a tiny, dimly-lit venue that might squeeze fifty or sixty spectators onto several tiers of benches clutching the wine, beer or soft drinks on offer at its small bar.

The show begins with a mystery – two darkly-clad (human) detectives (or spies? Ne'er-do-wells?) with flashlights make their way through a landscape of old oil drums and rusted metal cast-offs. They are looking desperately for something. What they find are several odd (puppet) characters – a mermaid and a “bird-man” who seem to be refugees from some strange little carnival sideshow. Their mission is to recapture these odd beings on the orders of some mysterious “boss” – and return them to a dark little circus. Which they do. In the process of completing their task, both creatures undergo meta-morphoses that stir up fears through archetypal images normally consigned to the recesses of our “collective unconscious”. The human performers accomplished this with a deftness that seemed quite magical. A good example would be one of the first actions of the birdman: As soon as he is discovered by the dark-clad humans, he attempts to escape. At that point in the show, this creature is no more than a head and two arms. We understand his fear and his instinct for flight as he attempts to climb the walls or skitter over the heads of the audience. Of course, he cannot escape the puppeteers who are manipulating him– as rational beings we understand that– yet the manipulation is so deft and the isolation of puppet and manipulator so thoroughly realized, that it seems escape is truly possible. One of the most powerful things a puppeteer can do is play that paradox. It awakens the sense of cognitive dissonance in which a thing is both impossible and possible at the same time.

Of course, the show must also have a point, and be entertaining and endlessly inventive. Le Cirque Orphelin does all that. Kudos to Les Sages Fous cast and crew South Miller (puppets), Jacob Brindamour and Olivia Faye (performers), Sylvain Longpré (mechanisms and ingenious devices), Christian Laflamme (music) and Patrice Daigneault (lighting) for their ingenious probing of puppetry's endless potential to transform and delight.