

Mr. Budhoo's Letter of Resignation from the  
I.M.F.

Bread and Puppet Theatre: Theatre for the  
New City

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The Bread and Puppet Theatre uses a very minimalistic theatre to communicate extremely powerful visual images. Their current show attempts to deal with the issues of third-world oppression via first-world monetary policy; especially as regards the World Bank and International Monetary Fund. Yet despite the technical scope of their topic, their work (which has little to do with puppets, despite the name) is almost entirely non-verbal.

The Bread and Puppet Theatre is admittedly working with extremely unconventional techniques and equipment — which made me all the more curious about their approach to lighting. Their props and costumes are almost entirely fabricated out of “found” objects; I was half expecting novel uses of used candlestubs and blown out lightbulbs as lighting implements. I was (very slightly) disappointed to find them using eight standard eight-inch fresnels and a manual preset board, but they used their small lighting inventory extremely well.

The Bread and Puppet Theatre's show consisted of a series of visual symbols which are almost impossible to describe. The most memorable involved a department-store mannequin, dressed in a banker's suit, with cardboard wings on his arms. Third-world peoples crept out from behind their huts to worship this “great white god,” who happened to be wearing a paper-maché mask to further enhance his caucasian-ness and disguise his face. The mannequin was lifted off his feet several times, then hoisted straight into the air via a rope and pulley, to the astonishment of the “natives.” The next

scene opened with a vast plain of third-world peoples on their backs, now wearing their own suits and white-man masks, with their own cardboard wings strapped to their arms. Slowly, they began to flap their arms, trying to fly. . .

With such an emphasis on visual image, one would imagine that visibility would be a primary focus of the lighting designer (especially with so few lights!). I was initially distracted by the fact that the 8-inch fresnels, rather than being focused for a smooth wash over the acting area, were randomly set between flood and spot, creating bright and dark spots on the floor. I can't say I noticed visible light variation on the actors during the performance, however, and the general feel of the Bread and Puppet Theatre is so intentionally rough-around-the-edges that I couldn't really tell if the uneven wash was purposeful, or just the result of poor focus maintenance. I suspect a little of both; a perfectly even wash would probably have seemed out of place amidst the hodge-podge of commune-created home-spun artistry.

Despite the lighting's simplicity and superficial disorder, there were some very nice effects created by the interaction of acting and lighting, and the simple variations between light and dark. The 'sophisticated' effect was a front-lit scrim which masked scene changes (did I mention the row of footlights?). The company was able to keep the overhead fresnels on partially during scene changes by washing the semi-translucent painted muslin with bright front-light, which obscured action and shadows behind the muslin just like a good scrim is supposed to. The most memorable effect, however, was the very end of the piece. Actors had started the wheels of three old bicycles suspended overstage spinning, retreating behind a landscape painted on a large cloth which they held up (don't ask me to explain how or why or what all it meant!). As the whirring and clicking bicycle wheels wound down, the lights very slowly dimmed down, timing it so the lights' fade was timed exactly as the aural fade of the spinning wheels. For a good thirty-seconds, the audience sat in silence except for the slowly slowing wheels, ending in complete darkness in which the final slow clicks of the wheels overhead were heard. Then silence and stillness before the curtain call. Somehow it felt as if all your senses were participating in the final closing of the piece: eyes and ears together sensed the dying moments. It was extremely simple, and very effective. Darkness is a powerful thing, especially when so long anticipated.

To return briefly to the basic lighting key for the production: the basic "space" lighting was the 8" fresnels overhead; front light can from the same front-of-stage footlights which illuminated the "scrim." The fresnels alone

lent an eerie (but dim!) top-light (I forget now which cue they used the top light alone in), but the footlights were vitally necessary for facial illumination. There was no gel used in any unit.

I had no clue what to expect from the Bread and Puppet Theatre performance, other than that it had been highly recommended; I was disappointed to find their lighting instrumentation and use wasn't as creative as the rest of the theatrical experience, but they did manage to use the instruments they had effectively to illuminate the performance — and after all, illumination is the foremost job of the lighting designer.