



JASON STANG PHOTO

Old Trout's puppets pull you into the world of Ignorance.

Ignorance is bliss

I never cease to be amazed by Calgary's own The Old Trout Puppet Workshop.

With every show I've seen, I just sit back and watch in awe as the performance unfolds.

Even if I'm not completely enchanted with the plot, I'm amazed at the genius that has gone into creating and executing it.

Such is the case with the company's latest creation, *Ignorance: The Evolution of Happiness*, currently running in the Pumphouse's Victor Mitchell Theatre.

Ignorance reimagines The Garden of Eden as a bleak, inhospitable place, sort of like Calgary in January and February.

As in the biblical version of Eden, it's Eve who wreaks havoc by bringing enlightenment. She develops imagination, which means she and Adam realize just how wonderful things could be.

Ping pong-ing between prehistory and modern days, *Ignorance* is a bit like the *Cloud Atlas* of puppet shows. One minute we're back in Adam's cave and then we're in a bustling city where modern man is trying to artificially manufacture happiness.

It's not what *Ignorance*



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has to say, but how brilliantly it says it.

It minimizes what they accomplish to simply call Nicolas Di Gaetano, Trevor Leigh and Viktor Lukawski puppeteers. They are extensions of their puppets, acting with every muscle of their bodies for results that are as mesmerizing as they are hilarious.

For all the nonsense it trots out to make its points, there is an incredible poignancy to Eve mourning Adam's death, which goes to say just how much gets drawn into the world of *Ignorance*.

IGNORANCE



Pumphouse Theatre

RUNS

Until Nov. 4

STARRING

Old Trout Puppet Workshop

Ignorance is bliss as Old Trout puppets rule the roost

BY BOB CLARK, CALGARY HERALD JUNE 15, 2012

Presented By:



Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald Trevor Leigh during a performance of Ignorance, a show about the search for happiness.

Photograph by: Dean Bicknell, Calgary Herald

Watching the three hooded cast members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop creep, cavort and manipulate their way through the ensemble's new show, Ignorance, you can't help thinking these are just the kind of guys you'd like to have over to play with your kids and their toys.

Or tell them stories of some of the comically base but basic things that can happen around a Stone Age campfire — which, in the case of Ignorance, happens to be set in a phantasmagorical "cave" fashioned from two giant interlocking antlers with a skin stretched between them.

With the show's running gag, or leitmotif, of yellow balloons with happy faces, plus segments featuring three little red cars, or a Rube Goldberg contraption that spits out a few of the aforementioned inflatables — not to mention puppeteers who animate their humanoid charges while wheeling around on office chairs — you'd swear you were at some sort of Shriners benefit.

Except, of course, you're not.

You're in the world of the Trouts, a darkly fantastic and gothically Romantic, Tim Burton-meets-Cirque du Soleil-ish sort of place. In the case of Ignorance, it boasts primitive murders and a suicide, cannibalism, a little caveman combat, and a prowling, bellicose Paleozoic puppet monster who's on the lookout for the Cro-Magnons. This pair function as our typical prototypes, documentary-style, created to guide us through a fancifully prehistoric prehistoric of happiness, if not its modern analogues and consequences (which is where the Trouts' suited Everyman puppets come in).

All in good fun.

Make that very good fun.

Joining regular Old Trout pros Peter Balkwill and Pityu Kenderes onstage for Ignorance is Trevor Leigh, the well-known Calgary actor who acts here as if he's been a puppet master for the Trouts forever.

Offstage we have Judd Palmer in the form of a voice-over done up as a mid-Atlantic accent doing a characteristically literate and tongue-in-cheek Trout script, its cleverness sometimes obscured by the soundtrack, a potpourri of old recordings featuring everything from Mayan kitsch by multi-octave vocal wonder Yma Sumac to Franz Liszt's Totentanz (Dies Irae).

The "crude" bone-stick-and-hair puppets are a delight — especially a stamping pre-mastodon creation with a long articulated tail and sound effects straight out of Jurassic Park.

The projected black and white videos — stuff like panoramas of snowy barrenness or traffic — help too in bringing home what Ignorance ultimately stands for: the joy — "happiness"— of child's play, re-captured over and over in the exercise of imagination, if only the bad stuff that can result from what is imagined doesn't get in the way.

Review: The Magnetic North Theatre Festival presents the Old Trout Puppet Workshop's Ignorance through Sunday at the Martha Cohen Theatre. Tickets: Call 403-294-9494. Four out of five stars.

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Old Trouts ponder prehistoric man in Ignorance

BY STUART DERDEYN, POSTMEDIA MARCH 9, 2012



Ignorance is being called a "puppet documentary."

Photograph by: External

Did our prehistoric ancestors have their own Punch & Judy shows?

It's the sort of question asked by the creative team at the Calgary-based Old Trout Puppet Workshop in developing its latest show, *Ignorance*.

The folks who presented such zaniness as *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, *The Tooth Fairy* and *The Erotic Anguish of Don Juan* decided to go "open source," creating its "puppet documentary about prehistoric humanity."

Through its website, the troupe posted ideas in the storyline, solicited commentary and incorporated quite a bit of it into a "conceptualized" world about what we were up to trying to find satisfaction and happiness back when "ook, ack" was a primo pickup line.

"It took effort, for sure, but it was a really worthy effort and fun to do," says Judd Palmer, a head puppeteer. "It became a more wide-ranging philosophical discussion about the meaning of happiness, pseudo facts about prehistoric humans and other wider, more profound directions than we could've managed with our own miniature brains."

So much of the public input into the material was wacky enough that the Trouts even built up a

separate pseudo-facts section on the website.

The aim of the sub-site is to further foster discussion into some of the more bizarre aspects. Turns out that the Internet is a pretty good place to find utterly wrong and completely mad theories.

"It may not be true, but that's fine. A mythology was built up around the truth and the pseudo facts because they fit the story."

What is it about exactly?

"What it is, is a documentary on the subject of happiness dating back to the development of the pre-frontal lobe, which is where most science sees the beginnings of abstract thoughts. Because the thinking is that we are designed to be dissatisfied and strive to achieve pleasure."

Palmer says there are two interlocking stories. The fall from Eden idea and the creation of knowledge up against the day-to-day drudgery of our "slope-browed cousins" and then up to our modern day to compare and contrast how things worked out.

Some "puppet historians" have posited that some of the carved rocks found in cave digs are Stone Age versions of the modern marionette, so the characters in this show include, literally, rocks on sticks.

"It's kind of a continuation of the whole animistic notion of some trees or rocks having spirits because of how they look. So we built the puppets out of rocks, bones, sinews, charcoal and so on. It's been a total hoot," says Palmer.

A hootenanny matched only by the amount of fun the team had going into the studio to make some of the music to go along with the play. Additional sound design was provided by old 78-r.p.m. albums of ethnomusicologists playing models of ancient bone flutes and similar such. It is an advantage that the puppeteers had over the ancients.

Palmer notes that the rock puppets sound not bad being struck together. So it is likely that some variation of Punch & Judy existed eons ago.

THEATRE REVIEW

Ignorance

You may not have found the meaning of life, but *Ignorance* gives you all the right questions to ask



Esther Tung
Arts Editor

Bliss became elusive once our pre-frontal cortexes outgrew ignorance. We spend our lives in search of happiness, but are prohibited by evolutionary design from stopping to smell the roses for too long. What is the meaning of life then — contentment itself, or the never-ending search for it? Or is it something else altogether?

Puppets, managed by a trio of shadowy men in button-up rompers, unfold the simple, yet evocative narrative of seeking the answer to the big question that has been plaguing humans since the evolution of sentient thought. In Discovery Channel documentary style, an omniscient narrator follows the first man and woman in their search for greener pastures, driven by their mutated cognizance of desire and imagination. The pair, created out of what appears to be a rock and some twigs, gibber at each other only in cave-talk, and indeed the puppeteers never say a real word the entire time, but create dialogue through non-verbal cues instead. Sentiments get lost once or twice in a squabble drawn out too long

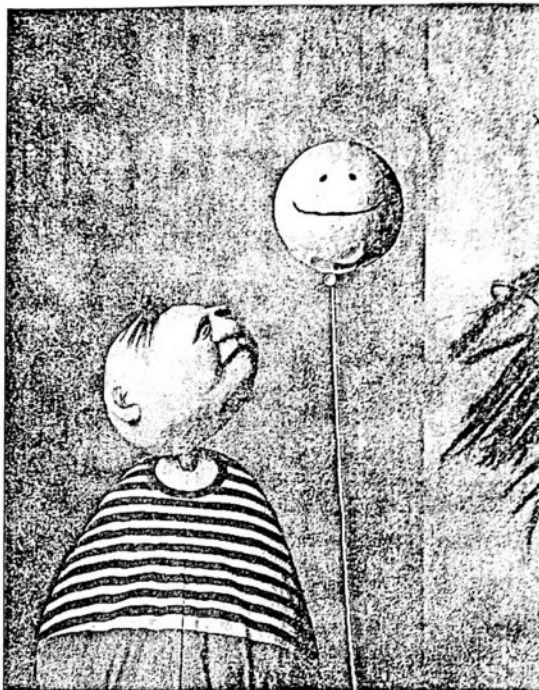
for comedy's sake or just because it was a difficult one to convey, but the narrator keeps viewers focused on the big picture. The cave couple's story thread wears thin towards the end of the play, though whimsical and dark snapshots from contemporary are spliced in to keep the palette cleansed.

The comedy appeals to our more primitive sense of humour, which comes off as juvenile at times.

This is a story that can be told only by their puppets, which were all designed with care and attention to detail, but made with rough handling in mind. Old Trout employs comedic tricks that appeal to our more primitive side, which seems rather appropriate, though it comes off juvenile at times — puppets are intentionally knocked into things at stage exits or dropped from up high without warning.

Ignorance is not self-indulgent in its exploration of the theme, as it could easily have been, and encourages viewers to create their own meaning rather than pushing them in any one philosophical direction. *Ignorance* strikes that delicate balance between being light-hearted, yet thought-provoking, and does so without patronizing its audience. ▶

Ignorance will be showing at the Cultch until March 10.



The Old Trout production team was also behind *Famous Puppet Death Scenes* and *The Erotic Anguish of Don Juan*.

Ignorance is Creative Genius

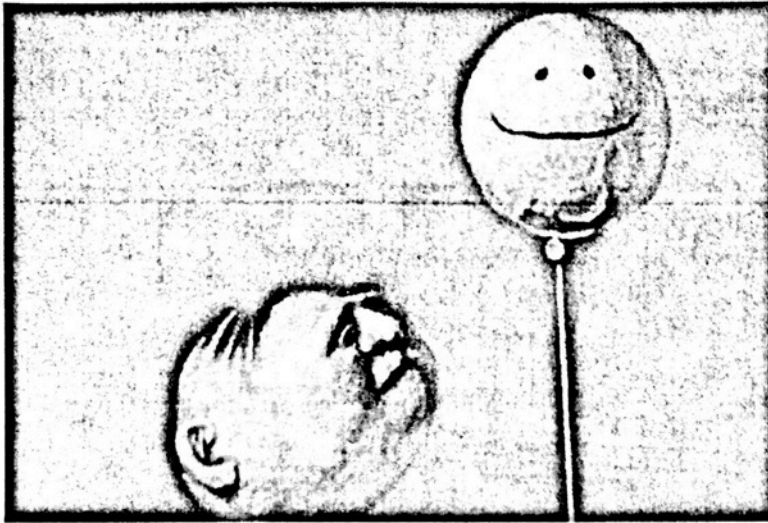
In the end, I think that the play had a reasonably uplifting message. There's a good healthy dose of cynicism in there. A little more determinism than suits my palette, but in the end, there is hope for the species. Something bloater than happiness. Now if only we could work out what that was...



The pursuit of happiness: Ignorance premieres at The Cultch

Pamela Grcic | Posted: Mar 7th, 2012

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A still from Ignorance.

A boy walks into the zoo and is handed a smiling, yellow balloon. He is delighted and holds it proudly, as the spinning helix atop his hat betrays his joy. The balloon wanders around him softly, kindly, before finally winding its string around his neck, strangling him. It seems too hard to get a hold on happiness for long. In *Ignorance*, it seems too hard to get a hold on happiness for long. Instead, it becomes something futile and unattainable, just as the boy's grasp on the balloon.

A whimsical, sarcastic puppet documentary for adults, *Ignorance* revolves around humanity's restless pursuit of happiness. Created by the Old Trouts Puppet Workshop, the play focuses on the perils and tribulations of this journey, while expounding upon the evolution of the emotion.

Since 1999, the Calgary-based puppet company – self-described as a bunch of friends, fond of “beards, wood and wool” – has been amusing audiences with their eclectic film and theatre productions, both inside and outside of Canada. *Ignorance* premiered last week in Vancouver and is currently playing at The Cultch.

The Old Trouts were first intrigued by the elusive quality of happiness, and the prefrontal role that our brains play in its attainment. From here, they went on to collect pieces of information on the subject, gathered from books and online exchanges with the company's fans. The final result of their efforts was *Ignorance*, an anthropologically inspired meta-narrative, steeped in dark humour.

This was the first time the Old Trouts had posted an open call on their website, asking fans to assist in the script's creation. However, this method was not much of a stretch from their usual *modus operandi* – a fervent believer in collective input, the Trouts understand imagination as something that evolves from many participants, rather than a sole creator.

“We just kind of get together and throw ideas around and see what it comes of it,” explained Old Trout puppeteer and writer Judd Palmer. This open participation concept was just “an extension of our working method.”

To Palmer, the smiling balloon symbolized not only an obvious and "simple representation of happiness," but also a, "plastic, emptied headed happiness."

The idea expressed in *Ignorance*, is that modern happiness is no longer something that can be easily observed and attained. Instead, it has evolved into an ideal much more qualitative and individualistic.

"Happiness is actually closer to what you have, than it is to an emotional state," Palmer opined.

Enter the prehistoric puppets: Adam and Eve, the first couple on Earth, and the bully, Gog, crafted as they would have been in the Cro-Magnon Era. Constructed of wood, they are an amalgamation of rudimentary shapes with big, uneven heads and twiggly limbs.

Accompanied by the great mastodon, mega-rats, and other prehistoric beasts, the play revolves around the characters' pursuit of happiness, spanning through to our evolved, modern state.

Accompanying this journey is the narrator, who muses on human unhappiness, an experience that arises out of its painfully ephemeral counter emotion. Happiness exists only in the human brain, in the prefrontal lobe region that makes people imagine all kinds of happy situations, which cannot be easily achieved. *This is what the narrator faults as "our evolutionary disadvantage: constant dissatisfaction."*

In one scene, Eve has what seems to be her first bout of imagination, invoking in her mind a tree with apples, (projected on a screen), that she shares with Adam. Sharing her ideal of happiness with him inspires Adam towards a purpose. Her imagination drives him to defend what he loves, as it is tested through the Ice Age.

In modern times, the balloon of happiness appears in many instances. It helps a man to find joy before suicide. It is the object of a dispute between a man and a woman. It is a prelude to an elderly man's heart attack. All of these figures crave happiness, but what if happiness is not the point?

In Trout troupe's hands, Ignorance is witty fun

Puppets probe age-old puzzle: Why can't we just be happy?

Liz Nicholls

Edmonton Journal

Saturday, March 24, 2012

REVIEW

Ignorance

Theatre: The Old Trout Puppet Workshop

Starring: Peter Balkwill, Pityu Kenderes, Trevor Leigh

Where: Theatre Network at the Roxy , 10708 124 St.

Running: through April 8

Tickets: 780-453-2440 or Tix on the Square (780-420-1757, tixonthesquare.ca)

In one memorable scene in *Ignorance*, you see two grimvisaged old people armed with butterfly nets. They're chasing the same yellow smiley balloon, and end up thrashing each other violently. Happiness has that effect on people.

This oddball, quixotic little "documentary" from Calgary's famously off-centre Old Trout Puppet Workshop purports to address the age-old question: Why can't we get happy, and stay that way for longer than 23 seconds at a time? "What's gone wrong?" intones the narrator in his gravely faux-warm docu-speak voice. "How has happiness slipped from our grasp?"

This philosophical pursuit isn't content with tortured monologues from misery steeped characters, familiar in other branches of Canadian theatre. No, the Trouts trace the evolution of happiness back to prehistoric times in smoke-filled caves, and even further back, to the very birth of the universe. Side note: docu-king Ken Burns is downright lax in comparison.

"The Paleolithic era was no paradise," concedes the narrator suavely, as prehistorical evidence mounts before our eyes - in puppet vignettes with onscreen mood enhancement from actual 30,000 B.C. footage (designer: Jamie Nesbitt). Still, we've lost that special happy feeling you get from slurping over the raw bleeding haunch of a mastodon.

Ignorance looks very different from the Trouts' other work. There's a sophisticated perversity to this return to the First Cause of puppetry in all its crudity: puppet heads that are two rocks hinged together with dints for eyes, and stick arms; monsters that are deconstructed fossils; gibberish for language. But as in their hit *Famous Puppet Death Scenes*, with its deadpan catalogue of demises, *Ignorance*

reveals a signature Trout wit and cast of mind. They're in love with absurdity. They embrace paradox with a lover's fervour.

The birth of the imagination, and the fantasy-provoked quest for happiness, is also the birth of disappointment and despair. In reaching for the yellow balloon, one sad-sack gets throttled on the string. It's a perfectly Trout-ian irony. The modern characters, battered by quintessential Troutisms, are soft-bodied pillow bodies with beautifully expressive chiselled heads, that use the puppeteers' own hands and arms, and their feet for propulsion.

In the cave, imaginatively lit by Cimmeron Meyer, something magical happens; rocks take on a wary or wistful expression; they reveal fear, or horror, or happiness. Which says something about the expertise of the puppeteers (Peter Balkwill, Pityu Keneres, Trevor Leigh), whose amusing grey long-john/helmet costumes seem to have been created by cavepersons, too (designer: Jen Gareau).

What unfolds, 30,000 B.C., is a kind of Creation myth cum love story between Man, who's slow on the uptake, and Eve, whose pre-front lobes can imagine happiness and therefore get depressed. Modern man only gets slivers of happiness, which make him chronically dissatisfied. So it is with Ignorance. It's fun, it's smart, it's 75 minutes, and it leaves you wanting more of it.

Dissatisfaction: that's an irony the company should appreciate.

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Read Liz Nicholls's blog Stagestruck at edmontonjournal.com/blogs To watch a video of Ignorance, go to edmontonjournal.com/entertainment