

No.11 Productions
Selected Press



The Oregon Trail: Quest for the West!
Maryland Theatre Guide review
Lauren Honeycutt · July 9, 2011

When I was in my 8th grade Creative Writing class, all I ever wanted to do was finish my classwork quickly so that I would have time to play my favorite computer game Oregon Trail. Today, after 17 years, I was able to see this game come to life in *The Oregon Trail: Quest for the West!* In all honesty, this is one of the cleverest new musicals that I have seen in years!

Directed by Ryan Emmons, *Oregon Trail* tells the story of an optimistic group of adventurers on their way from Missouri to Oregon in 1848, and the best part is that the audience helps to decide which way the story goes! The Narrator (Max Schneller) tells the story of Jedediah (John Bambery) who is a banker from New York (occupation selected by the audience) and is traveling to Oregon to start a new life with his religious sister Hope (Haley Greenstein). Before they begin their journey, the pair meets up with the mysterious Asdfjkl; (Brian Walters), handsome Jesse James II (named by Friday night's audience and played by Jeff Smith), and spunky gunslinger Rebecca Black (also named by the audience and played by Julie Congress). Along the way, the six travelers meet up with many of the same troubles that plague the players of the original Oregon Trail game: crossing a river, dysentery and extra-long delays due to stubbed toes. Each of the actors is very strong and incredibly funny! Greenstein's Hope and Schneller's Narrator are especially entertaining with their expert comedic timing and hilarious facial expressions.

Keyboardist Enrico de Trizio caught the audience's attention from the first time his fingers hit the keys with his vigorous musical performance. Maura Cordial's lighting design fit every mood from the bright lights at joyous times to flashing lights during points of crisis. The 19th century Old West costumes designed by Julie Congress perfectly fit the setting, and Prop Designer Jen Neads outdid herself by accessorizing the stage with items originally found in the game (including two adorable fake oxen).

With the book written by Julie Congress, Ryan Emmons, Jen Neads and Zach Fithian, the music written by Rebecca Greenstein and Danny Tieger, and the incidental music created by Steve Goodwin, *The Oregon Trail: Quest for the West* is a must-see production at this year's Fringe Festival. During the show, one of the characters asks, "What do you think this is? A game?" No, this is not a game...it is SO much better than that!

SHOW BUSINESS

The Performing Arts Magazine Since 1941

Quest for the West: Adventures on the Oregon Trail!

Show Business Weekly Review

Sarah Lucie · August 15, 2012

Get your wagon ready for a trip down the Oregon Trail with No. 11 Production's new interactive comedy *Quest for the West*. The show combines all the interactive fun of the now legendary video game with a catchy score and hilarious script to produce a theatrical jackpot. And yes, someone dies of dysentery. But that's no surprise.

All of the best memories of the classic video game make an appearance, from the computerized sound effects to hunting for bears, as Jedediah (John Bambery) and his sister Hope (Haley Greenstein) set off to manifest their destiny. As we all know, five settlers need to start the journey, so they find a sharp-shooting lady (Julie Congress) and an enthusiastic but slow-witted gentleman (Scott Raymond Johnson), both of whom the audience gets to name, and Asdfjkl; (Steven Conroy) to join them on their way to the West. There's just not enough time to name everyone when there are games to be played! The trip is filled with the typical terrors (snake bites, fording a river . . . you know the rest), but there are a few refreshing surprises too.

The playful creativity supporting every aspect of the production and the group's unbridled sense of fun is contagious. It's not long before the audience is enthusiastically yodeling, stomping to create a stampede, and voting on how the group should cross the river. And like a choose-your-own-adventure novel, every adventure on the Oregon Trail will be slightly different.

What does set this production above the computerized version we all know and love is the exceptional ensemble and Broadway-quality music. The score is complete with eleven original songs, all of which are filled with clever puns voiced by high-caliber singers, most notably John Bambery and Scott Raymond Johnson. One that particularly stands out is the love song "Ailing for You," which Haley Greenstein and Scott Raymond Johnson brilliantly scratch and cough their way through. But let us not forget another highlight of the show—Maxwell Schneller as the narrator who does it all. Not only does he keep track of the score, play host, and manage the interactive games, but he also can seemingly transform into any outrageous character with boundless energy.

Quest for the West's combination of interactive games, witty yet poignant script, and music that can't help but get stuck in your head makes it one of the most clever new musicals around and a Fringe Fest show that can't be missed. Join in on the fun with the ensemble that is clearly overjoyed to lead you on this rousing and slightly ridiculous adventure.

backstage★

Friends Call Me Albert

Backstage Interview

Casey Mink interviewing Alison Novelli · September 12, 2017

Both humans and puppets inhabit No. 11 Productions' latest project, "Friends Call Me Albert," a new play from Zachary Desmond about Albert Einstein and his physicist wife, Mileva Marić. Backstage spoke with puppeteer Alison Novelli about what actors can gain from puppetry.

Puppeteering is acting—sort of.

"A puppeteer is someone who manipulates something onstage to create life out of an inanimate object. [It's acting] in the sense that you have a character and a story to tell; it's not acting in that you're not putting yourself in that situation. It's more [like] choreography. It's understanding that if you move your hand this way, it then tells this story."

Actors can learn a lot about people from puppetry.

"You learn a lot about behavior when you have to create it as a third party. When you're creating it artificially, you learn how specific you have to be. I'd love to say it makes me a better actor by being able to work with puppets, but I think it makes me a more diverse storyteller because the stories I've told with puppets are different from anything else I've seen."

Puppet-human casts provide a unique perspective.

"In 'Friends Call Me Albert,' there's a mix. It lets you comment on the world and, particularly if they're human puppets, how they affect character. We have puppets that are portraying people in real life. They have to hold their own backstory as well as the world within the play."

Puppetry is two-tiered.

"If you think of it like an actor, you develop a character and the character is telling a story, but the puppeteers are not only figuring out the character arc but also how they move and how they tell that story. You always have to be moving, otherwise the puppet falls dead onstage. Anything that is alive is always moving. [Humans] have the benefit of breathing that shows we're alive, whether we're conscious of it or not. With puppeteering, you always have to be conscious of movement because that reads as life."

Puppeteering allows for risk-taking.

"I honestly find puppetry is a little easier than acting because you have this series of movements and a concrete script that is definite. I know that if I move in this manner, it will succeed. Whereas with acting, you never know quite how it's going to land, and it's different every single night. Of course, with puppetry, it's different every single night, but there's more forgiveness because it's not a living creature. People's suspended disbelief is larger and more accommodating, so it's almost a safer environment where you can explore the extremes of society."

The Washington Post

Coosje

Washington Post Review

Jane Horwitz · July 11, 2014

A bespectacled fellow (Steven Conroy) walks onstage and introduces himself as sculptor Claes Oldenburg. He invites you on a journey about love, death and understanding, then steps away as a black-and-white video pops onto a screen, revealing an eccentric collection of people frolicking in a field, perhaps an homage to modern art from Dadaism forward.

Thus begins a fanciful and engaging multimedia meditation on art and the marriage of true minds. The New York-based troupe, No. 11 Productions, several of its members recent products of Skidmore College's theater program, devised the piece.

Titled "Coosje," after Oldenburg's late wife and close collaborator, the art critic and scholar Coosje van Bruggen (Julie Congress), who died in 2009, the piece tells its story with piquant live music, whimsical videos and a life-size singing and talking Pear (Sina Heiss). In a bulbous green costume and hat with a stem, Pear travels the world in the name of her fellows, those forever trapped in trees, fruit salads and still lifes.

While huge pears do figure prominently in at least one Oldenburg-van Bruggen work at the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, the singing Pear interludes that break up the narrative don't comment all that directly on the rest of the story. Her travel songs (by Danny Tieger) have musical charm but not always distinguishable lyrics, as the actress's voice competes unplugged with amplified accompaniment. The tuneful melodies please the ear, but they don't add a new level of understanding.

That emerges in the short, sharply penned and acted episodes tracing the love story and [artistic partnership of Claes and Coosje](#). The two meet as Claes installs a sculpture in a museum where Coosje works. When asked for an opinion, she says, "It's big — but I don't like it." That sets off a never-ending debate as the two fall in love and marry, over how to conceive monumental sculptures and how to place them in the world.



Friends Call Me Albert

CultureCatch Review

Leah Richards and John Ziegler · September 2, 2017

The same day that we saw *Friends Call Me Albert*, Zachary Desmond's world premiere "bio-epic" of Albert Einstein, *Gizmodo* headlined a post about a new paper arguing that quantum entanglement is an inevitable feature of any fundamental physical theory, "Scientists Finally Prove Strange Quantum Physics Idea Einstein Hated." While the *Gizmodo* piece itself describes entanglement as "what allows particles that have once interacted to share a connection regardless of the separation between them," it also quotes Einstein's derisive description of it as "'spooky action at a distance.'" A century after his general theory of relativity was published and more than half a century after his death, Einstein remains, at least in the popular imagination, the central point of reference for modern physics. Desmond's play too takes this towering figure as its center, but it also illuminates an important woman historically obscured by the tower's shadow.

The production begins in 1919, at the point when Einstein's theory of relativity, published four years previously, was receiving widespread acclaim having been tested by an eclipse; Albert (Steven Conroy) ends up buried in food, friends, family, and admirers onstage. It doesn't take too long, however, for it to become clear that this is not a linear biographical narrative; and, within the postmodern bricolage of the play's structure, the core organizing principle becomes clear when Albert meets Mileva Marić (Julie Congress), another student of physics who will become his first wife. Over the course of the play, we see their courtship, a lot of drinking and debate with their circle of friends, an ill-fated meeting with Albert's bourgeois parents, an unexpected pregnancy (in one of the production's instances of creative lighting and staging), and its aftermath. Their relationship provides the gravitational force that holds together the collage of memories and impressions from Einstein's life that we witness, reflective of and reflected in, perhaps, his occasional feeling that his "life is just this series of moments, mashed together, with all the stuff in the middle cut out."

The relative experience of time in Einstein's theories is paralleled by how *Friends Call Me Albert* structures the experience of its audience and characters. The recurring metaphor of the eclipse highlights the influence of perspective, which bends events like gravity bends light. All of the characters aside from Albert and Mileva are played by puppets, operated by Chris Clark, Alison Novelli, and Emily Vetsch, which not only allows a small cast to embody a large number of people but also suggest that from Albert's dominant perspective, he and Mileva are the only "real" people in the story. (His second wife, Elsa, in contrast, appears only as a puppet, albeit one larger than the others.) *Friends* represents Mileva as having a substantial role in Einstein's achievements, certainly in their writing and dissemination, and, near the end, she offers a counterbalancing perspective to Albert's during an affecting, time-bending postmortem of their relationship and her own scientific ambitions.

No.11 Productions is a group of eleven (you guessed it!) multidisciplinary artists, and, under the direction of Ryan Emmons, their collaborative process brings a number of inventive elements to the production. These range from the aforementioned pregnancy scene; to the physical representations of light--strikingly beautiful and important in the play as a metaphor and as Albert's obsession--both by the puppeteers and by floor-to-ceiling strings that suggest beams of light or lines of force; to musician Enrico

de Trizio's onstage work, worth watching in itself; to Albert and Mileva transforming themselves and their lives into equations scrawled in chalk on the theater walls. Steven Conroy's Albert is primarily personable and enthusiastic, with flashes of stubbornness and inability to cope, and Julie Congress showcases a complex Mileva who is tender and supportive as much as assertive and driven. Together, they establish a multidimensional relationship, with its physical and intellectual chemistry as well as its tensions and disappointments, that lends the necessary emotional weight to their climactic conversation.

The tone is overwhelmingly modern and amusing--the puppets tend to bring a lot of levity to their scenes and get many of the best jokes -- but the second half of the play injects a heavier dose of melancholy, even as linearity collapses more aggressively and completely and the unkempt white-haired Einstein wig makes its first appearance. We have seen Albert's self-doubt at times by this point, but the second act finds him past his scientific zenith, never finding the unifying theory of physics that he sought and facing the ethical dilemma, juxtaposed with his and Mileva's family and marriage troubles 20 years previously, of being asked to help persuade President Roosevelt to develop an atomic bomb. For all the talk of immutable forces, and predetermined paths, ultimately, the play highlights the significance of choice, and it chooses to give the last words of the evening to Mileva. It's up to you to make the choice to hear them yourself.



The Eyes of Orbach
Theatre Is Easy Review
Sarah Moore · February 25, 2014

BOTTOM LINE: An enjoyable offering for this year's Frigid Festival -- a lighthearted romantic play with music set in New York.

When Broadway's Jerry Orbach died, he donated his eyes. What if the men who received the eyes via transplant met and fell in love? This is the hilarious premise of No. 11 Productions' *The Eyes of Orbach*, playing at the Kraine as part of this year's FRIGID Festival.

The story is framed by an eye doctor (the very funny Julie Congress) explaining the scientific aspects of sight to set up the plot. This includes an interactive eye exam, along with a little bit of background on eye transplants. This was a solid device used to begin the play. *Eyes of Orbach* also raises such relatable questions as: should you stay with your 9-to-6 job with dental insurance, or follow your dreams?

The main characters, the receivers of Orbach's eyes, are Paul (Steven Conroy) and Bill (Scott Raymond Johnson), who meet at a bar and recognize each other; they begin dating soon after. The story is peppered with cute Jerry Orbach jokes for the musical theater fans, as well as insider references like Dan Smith and Dr. Zizmor for New Yorkers to enjoy.

The minimal set and props are creatively used to imagine Citibikes and boats in Central Park, as well as a food truck, with a clever name which I won't spoil for you. Directed by Ryan Emmons with music by Aaron David Gleason, the show is funny, light-hearted and enjoyable, and moves along at a quick pace. A lot of the ideas presented are excellent, and the future of the piece is promising. If you are looking for a funny play that celebrates New York and musical comedy, check out *The Eyes of Orbach*.

Coosje
DC Theatre Scene
Susan Galbraith · July 11, 2014

Written collectively by the tight ensemble No. 11 Productions from New York, *Coosje* combines words, music, an art installation, and projections to tell the story of the romantic relationship and artistic partnership of conceptual artists Claes Oldenburg and Coosje Van Bruggen. As such, the work, served up by DC Fringe on its opening night, was a great way to reflect on art and art making, collaboration, and the importance of taking risks. It's what Capital Fringe is all about since 2005, stirring up artists and our DC community.

At the top of the show, the audience is told that this is a work about life, death and collaboration and then as if with a wink, "if you don't get it you're on to something." The sound of an old movie projector and the tinkling of a piano begin. Crude black on white drawings appear on a screen then come to life in simple animation. In a corner a big piece of silver-gray cloth is hung from the ceiling draped in folds like a half-collapsed tent.

Actor Steven Conroy introduces himself as Claes Oldenburg with such unassuming grace, I buy it immediately. The guy seems to be totally mentally absorbed, meandering on the stage as through life making series after series of drawings. Then suddenly Coosje, the critic and art historian, appears while Oldenburg is installing one of his art pieces in a museum. Played by Julie Congress with dark dramatic looks, piercing eyes, and a red slash of a mouth, the woman is riveting – all energy and sharp edges. "The placement," she says, weighing in on his work, "is not interesting." He gets it, and she gets him, going on to create a conceptual framework for his ideas, give him courage to realize his visions, and steer his career.

This wavelength in common produced some great iconic pop art works, often the gigantic size of which left the mundane forever imprinted on one's brain. I remember in Minneapolis at the Walker Art Center, where Oldenburg was a highly featured artist, he created the *Spoonbridge and Cherry* for its sculpture garden which has become the signature piece representing that city.

In *Coosje*, the Oldenburg-style celebration of the mundane is symbolized by a giant Green Pear, played live — yes, in a pear suit with green sneakers — by Sina Heiss. She rolls on and off the stage, sings, "floats" on an inner tube in the aisle, and then carries the same prop on stage like a giant doughnut. Somehow for me she represents both the muse and the artistic "offspring" of Claes and Coosje. Maybe Heiss's singing could be stronger, her diction clearer, but maybe that's the point of the silliness. Performance art is also often a celebration of the mundane.

Just as the character of Coosje says that what matters to her, that is what she is interested in is when art and the artist come alive in it (a work,) the same goes for the strongest moments of the production. A terrific scene is when the couple is seen playing racketball. Talking the whole while and beading with perspiration, they excite each other as they hammer away at an imaginary ball, driving it out again and

again towards the audience. It feels hard, urban, pounding like the art they served up. As artists they come alive in their work.

The high point of the drama is when Coosje confronts Oldenburg, determined that he give up some of his autonomy (and male chauvinism perhaps) and to embrace her as a full artistic collaborator. Conroy is terrific in this scene, showing his character struggling with his ego and his growing awareness of her importance as co-creator as well as girlfriend. Congress conveys both intellectual strength and feminine vulnerability.

Ryan Emmons has directed the show with a sure sense of the dramatic tension as well as the visual elements. He could still tweak the auditory balance some more. Danny Tieger's songs don't yet make a strong enough contribution that they could. Jen Neads' visual art partners with Enrico de Trizio's projections well, and I particularly liked how the black and white world on the screen begins adding color, developing in parallel as the artist's world becomes enriched by his partnership with the woman who became his wife of thirty-two years. Kathleen Blanchard's creation of the pear costume is just kooky enough to remind us this is Fringe!

Step out of one's comfort zone and take a bite of this work. You'll find it juicy and go away thinking about the curious nature of art-making. Is a pear ever just a pear?



The Eyes of Orbach
nytheater now Review
Martin Denton · February 28, 2014

What struck me most about *The Eyes of Orbach*, a new play by FRIGID veterans No.11 Productions, is how it reflects attitudes nearly completely opposite those held by the protagonists of *Shooting Abe*. For at its heart, *Eyes* is a romantic comedy about two gay New Yorkers, Billy and Paul, in which the genders/sexual preferences of the lovers are not an issue, even one iota. This is not a "gay play" in any sense (except, perhaps, the not-much-used sense of "gay" as light-hearted and delightful). And I love that about it.

There are three concepts underpinning this piece. The title clues us into the first, as the play imagines that its two heroes are the recipients of actor Jerry Orbach's eyes (which he famously donated to the Eye Bank when he died in 2004). A second concept arises around the play's setting, contemporary New York City; bucking the cynicism that seems to be currently in fashion, *Eyes* celebrates a Big Apple full of possibilities, where you can follow your dream and be whatever you want to be.

The third idea in the play riffs on what the eyes do: an Eye Doctor (who is also our Mistress of Ceremonies) breaks the fourth wall repeatedly to educate us about how eyes work and what's real and what's illusory about what we think of as "vision" or "clarity." This was my favorite thread, ultimately.

I think it's fair to say that the creators of *The Eyes of Orbach* are viewing this as a workshop presentation. It's a lot of fun, and is filled to the brim (and then some!) with creative notions and all manner of theatricality--musical numbers, puppets, surrealism, and more.

The ensemble, led by co-creator/costume designer Julie Congress as the Eye Doctor, is engaging and energetic: Steven Conroy and Scott Raymond Johnson portray Paul and Billy and make them easy to root for; Marie Claire Roussel, Aaron David Gleason, and Gil Newman take on numerous roles. Plus there are dance breaks featuring tapper Cameron Bartell and breaker Bill Medrano, both of whom remind us how talented those anonymous New Yorkers we see everywhere around us really are.



Coosje

nytheatre.com review

Ethan Angelica • February 29, 2012

Rarely does a bright green, singing pear appear onstage with two world-renowned artists. That alone is reason enough to see *Coosje* (pronounced *COH-sha*), currently playing in FRIGID New York. But it is decidedly not the only reason that this half-musical, half-play, all-performance piece should be on your “must see” list. The show stimulates a beautiful and inspiring conversation about art, life and the intersections of both journeys that I am still brewing on days later.

For those not in the know, Claes Oldenburg is a Swedish-American sculptor who is best known for creating oversized replicas of everyday objects, and placing them in very specific spaces. His wife, and collaborator, Coosje van Bruggen, was an art critic who passed away in 2009 from cancer. One of their more iconic works is the famed *Spoonbridge and Cherry* in Minneapolis. Their art has a sense of heightened reality to it, and the production does that idea complete justice.

The play (for lack of a better word) begins with a video “Happening,” a smart nod to Oldenburg’s early work and a perfect prequel to the somewhat altered reality we are about to encounter. As a pear drops from the videoed table, Haley Greenstein appears onstage, pronouncing, “I’m a pear. Self-aware ... I’ll live 1000 lives in one for every pear.” As our pear sets out on her adventure to find herself, Claes (Steven Conroy) and Coosje (Julie Congress) appear onstage, beginning their own quest through romance, art, collaboration, love and loss. Discussions of breaking new artistic ground and creating new creative contexts blend seamlessly into talk of the struggles and joys in love and work, and the journey we all take to find where we belong. The story never gets too intellectual to handle, but does inspire more questions than answers, which is precisely what the piece dictates.

The entire production is utterly delicious. Conroy and Congress give spectacularly nuanced, delicate performances, bringing exquisite depth and commitment to even the most absurd moments while gliding seamlessly from the intellectual to the emotional. Greenstein, with her fantastic voice and perky green dress (designed by Loring Taoka), is full of spunk and spice, and brings a beautiful humanity to her non-human role. Danny Tieger and Enrico de Trizio’s songs are a perfect compliment to the story, and Trizio’s live-mixing and projections are a smart addition to the augmented world of the show. Director Ryan Emmons and choreographer Olivia Wingerath stitch together reality and fantasy perfectly (the aging sequence brought tears to my eyes), and Ryan Hauenstein’s lights bring a joyful spark to the story.

Coosje is one of those rare, polished gems that are sometimes tough to find in a festival setting, and is the kind of show that makes you wish they had more than one hour to play. A strange, weird and wonderful happening in itself, *Coosje* prompts their audiences to wonder at what kind of journey we are on, and how our lives are pieces of art in themselves. It has already been extended into the FRIGID Hangover, and is more than worth a trip. You will walk out more “self-aware” yourself!