

On Theatre

Last Bread and Puppet Circus

ROSS LUMPKIN

A newcomer to the Bread and Puppet Theater once asked its founder and leader, Peter Schumann, why he always baked the bread that they gave away at every performance. "Because I am a baker," was his simple explanation.

For two days, on July 27 and 28, Peter Schumann baked bread for about 3000 people. The event, a "Domestic Resurrection Fair and Circus," was the culmination of 12 years of love, labor, and creativity by the Bread and Puppet Theater and other puppeteers who came to an enormous meadow and farmhouse in the blue hills of Vermont at Goddard College. Every inch of the land was used as a stage for more than 50 different performances and exhibits. There were puppets in rivers, up trees, on cliffs, and even in the chicken coup. This was the end of the Bread and Puppet Theater.

The enormity of the event invited everyone to say that this baker was the Cecil B. DeMille of bread and puppets. The most spectacular show was entitled "War and Peace." From the vantage point of a steep hill overlooking the enormous meadow, the audience watched armies of red and white puppets attack one another, finally leaving the white army prostrate on the field in a deathly silence.

As if this wasn't grand enough, in the next piece ("Jephthe," based on the oratorio by Carissimi), the audience sat below a steep cliff studded with masks that seemed to grow from the earth. Peter Schumann himself performed, dancing on stilts, and climbing



Ross Lumpkin

to the top of the cliff at the climax of the play. When he reached the top, one half-expected him to raise up his hands and bring puppets down from the sky.

I was standing beside a nicely dressed, proper, middle-aged man, waiting to get some free bread. He asked the tan, bare-chested baker with an enormous white chef's hat to pass him some bread. "Atta boy!" said the man as Peter Schumann gave him some bread.

By the time it was all over, one believed that Peter Schumann was a saint. Indeed, the religious, medieval character of

the weekend made the modern world seem crude and out of place. Cameras whirred and clicked in the silence. Dogs barked and ran loose. Nude children sometimes joined a performance to the delight of their counterculture parents. Yet the Bread and Puppet Theater not only withstood the onslaught, but overwhelmed us all.

Peter seemed to be everywhere. Even in the shows he didn't create himself, his influence was inescapable: a startling new approach to old fables and rituals that gave them modern implications. The grotesque puppets and masks moved in a slow, deliberate, Beckett-like pace. Peter's quiet, unassuming presence made an ironic contrast with unabashed respect that every member of the group

showed for him. I heard one visitor complain of Peter's dominance as authoritarian and undemocratic.

A member of the Bread and Puppet Theater explained it to me this way: "Yes, it's true and it goes even farther than artistic influence. If Peter has a bad day, we all feel very down. But if he's in good spirits, the mood spreads. None of us really mind. He's such a great person—the world doesn't deserve him. It's an honor to be a part of his company. And why shouldn't he influence us? All great artists influence their generation. We are just very sad that it's come to an end."

All the puppeteers I met were kind and generous, and regard themselves as "nice" people. Politically, they are "radical humanists," said one

with a half-smile on her lips. Though there were references to Vietnam, Chile, and other issues, the theme that emerged from the weekend was the more universal problem of the sadness of war, death, and tyranny. The contrast between them and the protest-oriented Living Theater, some of whom came for the weekend, was striking. The Living Theater dressed in flashy New York clothes, studded with stars, hiding behind three-toned sun glasses. To me, they looked like a bunch of burned-out hippies next to the warm, healthy puppeteers.

The theme of sadness was heightened by the knowledge that Peter Schumann was leaving and this was the last Bread and Puppet Show. Many seemed to be confused and unsure of what they would do next, as though they didn't want to think about it. Perhaps Peter knew it was time for him to turn his children loose and force them to stand on their own.

He has been very lucky to have many talented people working under him who need to be seen in their own light. I saw one play, *Not Afraid of Falling*, conceived, written and directed by Avram Pratt, that was absolutely brilliant. They are talking of taking it to New York. Margo Lee Sherman was one of the finest actresses I have ever seen. There are many more and they are beginning to make plans to put old and new shows together themselves to go on tour around the States and in Europe.

But only by coming out from under Peter Schumann could these individuals gain the recognition that they deserve. And only a man like Peter Schumann could have the wisdom and courage to disband his own theater at what appeared to many to be the peak of their 12 years of puppetry. •



Ross Lumpkin