

# The Arts

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## Where she stops, nobody knows

By Marc Estrin

ARTS CORRESPONDENT

**C**hristmas season, 1966. The war is heating up. At St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, Cardinal Spellman calls for victory, Victory!

On Fifth Avenue, among the shopping crowds, a young woman in white – white robe, white hood, white oriental mask – walks slowly up and down in front of the great Cathedral steps. She carries a bloody doll in her arms. And she carries a sign:

*I am Mary and my baby was napalmed in Vietnam.*

The police arrive: "No masks allowed, no concealed faces." So the young woman takes off the mask; her face is no longer concealed. And later, with full face, she mounts the steps of the Cathedral to leave the bloody Christ-child on the steps, a gift and reminder for the war-exultant cardinal.

"You can't leave that there!"

The men in blue.

"Why not?"

"It's littering."

*I am Mary and my baby was napalmed in Vietnam.*

The young woman was Margo Lee Sherman, and the event was one of the earliest creations of Peter Schumann's Bread & Puppet Theater – and in my opinion, one of the greatest pieces of political street theater in history.

Now, 40-plus years afterwards, Margo Lee Sherman is bringing her latest creation back to Bread & Puppet for the last Friday night offering of the season. On Aug. 31, at 8 p.m., in the New Building behind the Museum, Margo will present "What Do I Know about War?" an hour-long medley of stories told by 20 American soldiers, about their service in Iraq. Round-and-round she goes. Iraq – our latest Vietnam, waiting for its Laos and Cambodia in Iran.

*I am Mary.*

Margo Lee Sherman is an extraordinary actress because she is an extraordinary person. Her way is slow, her voice deep, her timing devastating. If you asked her for the time, and she said simply "8:15," you might break out



Submitted photo

**Margo Lee Sherman made a very theatrical political statement during the Vietnam War. She now does the same for the Iraq War.**

Bread & Puppet Theater will present Margo Lee Sherman in her one-woman show, "What Do I Know about War?" Friday, Aug. 31, at 8 p.m., at the Bread & Puppet Farm's New Building, Route 122 in Glover. Admission is by donation; call (802) 525-3031, or go online to [www.breadandpuppet.org](http://www.breadandpuppet.org). It will also be performed on Wednesday, Aug. 29, at 8 p.m., at the Tinderbox, 17 Elliot St. in Brattleboro. Admission is \$7; [www.myspace.com/thetinderbox](http://www.myspace.com/thetinderbox).

crying. She has that kind of an affect, that kind of tone, that kind of diction. The smallest of her gestures is enormous.

(See Sherman, Page D2)

# Sherman

(Continued from Page D1)

And here she is, 40 years and 30 one-woman shows later, still noting the same tears flooding the world, speaking them, sharing them, and calling them forth, still horrified.

Her choice of material is varied and subtle. For example, "What Do I Know about War?" was born from a story about Capt. Terrance Wright, who returned from Iraq and couldn't stop hiccupping. Hiccupping, that's funny. What a riot. Well, apparently not for Capt. Wright, who was later found in a Fayetteville motel room – dead – from what the Army called "an unknown illness."

OK then, hiccupping. Odd, maybe even grotesque. But what is hiccupping? Spasm of the diaphragm followed involuntarily by spasm of the glottis.

Spasm. Spasms. Like Iraq? Involuntary, out of control, impossible to stop by willing. Chronic hiccupping? One's humanity is left behind. Drinks in the hand are spilled and cups are broken. People make fun, and then avoid you, a victim of forces beyond your control.

The tiny actress makes big noises: explosions, gunfire, IEDs. Where have I heard these sounds before? Ah – those little boys with their Tonka tanks and Mattel space guns, making sounds that defy orthography, usually followed with "... you're dead!" Little boys – like those 18 year olds with automatic weapons, making – in their great wisdom – life and death decisions for whole families, whole towns of "dirty rag-heads" and "sand-niggers." That's where I've heard those sounds before. Little boys.

Such subtleties, conscious and unconscious, reverberate

throughout the piece because, as a current Bread & Puppet sideshow sings, "Everything, everything, everything is everything." Margo knows this, intensely, and the planet knows it, and humans need desperately to learn it.

An hour-long show, and for many of us a long trip to see it. But in its many contexts – the silences it must provoke, the discussions driving home, the expanded understanding, beyond casualty figures, of the human costs of war, the new wariness with which to hear claims of its "success" – the show is a long one, and huge. Like Margo Lee Sherman herself, tiny, tenacious, and deep.

*Marc Estrin, a novelist and musician living in Burlington, is the author of "Insect Dreams, the Half Life of Gregor Samsa," "The Education of Arnold Hitler" and "Golem Song."*