

# A PUPPET PERFORMANCE OF UNUSUAL PHILOSOPHY

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## ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Conceived by Sandglass cofounder Eric Bass and directed by Roberto Salomon, "One Way Street" is the story of one character's journey and, as Bass describes it, "a play that visually reads like a [Walter Benjamin] text." Benjamin - a quintessential European intellectual of the between-wars period - lived, thought, and wrote in highly eccentric style until his suicide in 1940. The show, which draws its title from an eclectic Benjamin text, will run for five performances tonight through Sunday at the New Repertory Theatre in Newton. It kicks off a season of adult puppetry organized by the Brookline- based Puppet Showplace Theatre.

The play centers on a bespectacled, mustachioed puppet that Bass carries through most of the show. A second main character is the Little Hunchback, a reference to a pet name Benjamin's mother reputedly coined due to his frequent bouts of childhood clumsiness. An enormous angel puppet recalls the "angel of history" from the scholar's "Theses on the Philosophy of History."

Sandglass Theater has worn its own path through the Old World. On regular European tours since the troupe's founding in Munich in 1986, Sandglass has earned an international reputation for challenging, innovative work. Since relocating to Vermont, Sandglass has hosted the biennial Puppets in the Green Mountains festival from their home theater.

## FULL TEXT

### STAGE REVIEW

Whether there truly is no use in crying over spilled milk depends on how much milk is spilled and what it is spilled on. When a cup of coffee spills in "One Way Street," a new puppet-theater work from Sandglass Theater of Putney, Vt., the effect is practically tragic: It spills on a treasured book.

The accident draws outside importance from the fact that the book belongs to a puppet designed to look like early-20th-century German philosopher Walter Benjamin. And that coffee cup and book are about the only constant elements in his puppet life as he moves through Europe on the run from the Nazis.

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Benjamin's angel of history, like the angel manipulated by Sandglass cofounder Ines Zeller Bass, looks wistfully to the past - perhaps hoping to repair a Europe in ruins - while being blown forward by a wind known as progress.

In other words, there is no mistaking "One Way Street" for "Sesame Street."

The poignant, ethereal, at times dark plays that define Sandglass Theater challenge conventional notions of puppet theater. The puppeteers appear onstage and respond, as actors, to story events. Following what Eric Bass calls a "nonliteral" approach, narrative meaning derives as much from nuanced moments as from discrete plot points - the emotional weight of a scene often bound up in a puppet's slightest movement.

Hence, also, the weighty significance ascribed to objects - coffee cups, books, shovels - in fostering psychological associations. "Everything we use in a piece needs to be looked at [carefully]," says Zeller Bass. "It means something. It has to fit into the metaphor." Film projections, music, and choreographed movement complete the dreamlike effect. "We really want the audience to see things that are not there," Eric Bass says.

"The piece is not about the plot," he says. "It's a piece that evokes a world, evokes a state of being, evokes an image of moral courage."

That state of being is also evoked through Dave Regan's set design. Inspired by Benjamin's literary appetites, the set is a virtual landscape of books, some large enough for the puppeteers to climb. The European cities along Benjamin's route literally spring forth from gargantuan pages.

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For Eric Bass, puppets are well suited to conveying great depths of humanity, despite being lifeless, man-made characters toted around by humans. "What's at issue is not whether or not [the character] is human," he says, "but whether it reflects something that is human. That's why puppets can reflect our humanity so well. Another human cannot reflect our humanity because they're in it with us. You can't get a reflection from something that's on the same side of the mirror."

## Illustration

Caption: "We really want the audience to see things that are not there," says Sandglass cofounder Eric Bass.

## DETAILS

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