

AROUND TOWN

FRIDAY, APRIL 10, 2009

PAGE 13

Compagnie Philippe Genty's productions are the stuff that dreams are made of. And nightmares, especially the Freudian kind.

They combine puppetry, dance, optical illusions and mime to explore the unconscious and conscious worlds.

In *La Fin des Terres* (Land's End), which opened at the National Theater last night, there are surrealistic landscapes, giant puppets with plastic baby faces, huge penises, a pair of legs that become scissor blades, a praying mantis with a human face, huge plastic bubbles that float like jellyfish, a King Kong-sized hand, several trap doors and lots of men in trench coats and fedoras.

The imagery comes from the mind of 71-year-old French artist/puppeteer/director Philippe Genty, in collaboration with his choreographer and wife Mary Underwood.

Genty trained to be a graphic designer, but got involved with puppetry because he found it easier to communicate through puppets than face-to-face. In 1961, he parlayed a grant from the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to make a film about puppet troupes into a four-year-long globetrotting journey that allowed him to stage his own puppet shows. In 1968, he started the company, and Underwood, a classically trained dancer, was one of its original members.

While Genty no longer travels with his troupe, his productions still traverse the world. The company was last in Taiwan 16 years ago and was supposed to return in 1999, but the September earthquake that year scuppered the visit.

La Fin des Terres, which premiered in 2004, centers on a couple who meet because of a letter. Their meeting, parting and search for one another are played out in parallel tracks, one "real" and one "dream."

As with other Genty works, there is no narrative flow to the 90-minute long *La Fin des Terres*; people, images and fantastic creatures appear and disappear like they do when we dream. Just as dreams allow our minds to fantasize and our most elemental fears to surface, Genty has a knack of creating scenes of unbelievable beauty as well as ones that can make his audiences squirm.

A sequence with scissor blades is guaranteed to leave most men feeling uncomfortable, while a human-faced bug — who dances a delicate, exquisite pas de deux with a young woman before wrapping her up in a web — is sure to give at least some female audience members nightmares.

The sexual imagery and references have led to the production being slapped with a "not suitable for children" label in several countries. The Compagnie Philippe Genty's seven actors may excel at interacting with huge puppets, but this is no *Muppets* show.

PERFORMANCE NOTES:

WHAT: Compagnie Philippe Genty, *La Fin des Terres*

WHEN: Tonight and tomorrow at 7:45pm, Sunday at 2:30pm

WHERE: National Theater, Taipei City

ADMISSION: NT\$600 to NT\$2,500, available at the NTCH box office or www.artsticket.com.tw

Members of the Compagnie Philippe Genty perform *La Fin des Terres*, which runs at the National Theater in Taipei this weekend.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF PASCAL FRANCOIS



To the ends of the Earth

Compagnie Philippe Genty's 'La Fin des Terres' goes where other visual theater performances dare to tread

BY DIANE BAKER
STAFF REPORTER



Compagnie Philippe Genty is about a whole lot more than just puppets.

PHOTO COURTESY OF NEW ASPECT INTERNATIONAL CULTURAL AND EDUCATIONAL FOUNDATION

Life's a trip

'La Fin des Terres' is one of Compagnie Philippe Genty's most technically ambitious productions

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

On Tuesday, the Compagnie Philippe Genty took possession of the National Theater's main auditorium to begin the complex stage setup for its production of *La Fin des Terres*, which opened yesterday.

Logistically the show is a huge undertaking. The company has brought with it nearly 7 tonnes of equipment to recreate the magical dreamscape envisioned by the show's creator Philippe Genty. Samia Doukali, who is the troupe's manager and responsible for shepherding the performers and equipment around the world and standing in for the aging Genty, said that *La Fin des Terres* was one of Genty's most technically ambitious productions.

"The set is extremely complicated and heavy, but the effect we create is very peaceful and light," Doukali said. This is the widest set that Genty has ever built, and in a new departure, he has devised an elaborate framework of panels. "There are many sliding panels, so that within the big frame that is the stage, he plays around with cutting up the spaces ... He is really experimenting with the view, the image, that he wants you to have. At one point, the massive frame you have in front of you is shrunk to the size of a postage stamp. Like in the cinema when you zoom in."

Though Genty, 71, developed his art from puppetry, Doukali emphasized that *La Fin des Terres* was not really a puppet show. "We use the term 'visual' theater. It's not dance, it's not puppets, it's not drama, it's not circus ... When Philippe started in France 40 years ago, there were not many companies doing this sort of thing. People did dance, or theater with words as a way of expressing things," Doukali said. "Philippe was lucky or clever enough to combine what he liked in other types of thing."

Doukali said Genty was influenced by Japan's Bunraku puppetry, in which puppeteers stand together with puppets, visibly manipulating them. "Philippe really likes the fact that as a puppeteer, you could just disappear, even while being so much present as well," Doukali said.

"In traditional Bunraku, [the work of the artist] is about giving life to a character," Doukali said. "Philippe developed this into giving life to any kind of object," she added.

Doukali also sees Genty's wife and long-time collaborator Mary Underwood as a key player in the development of Compagnie Philippe Genty's unique style. "They [Underwood and Genty] have been working together for the last 40 years. She was a dancer and she brought the rhythm and the timing [to the productions]. Philippe would come out with these wild ideas, and she helped him give shape and make it into an art where there was none before."

Genty's work inhabits the human subconscious, and this world beyond the external differences that divide people and cultures has proven to be universally appealing.

"Philippe, like any artist, you might say, is a rather disturbed person, so I believe he spent a lot of time wondering why he is different from other human beings. He used this [idea], how would you say, as a researching ground ... I think that is where he was clever, for wondering things about himself as a human being living in France, he began to realize that he was connecting with the entire world ... He wasn't trying to explain something about the world, he was exploring the human being. And human beings are the same everywhere. His strongest point is the subject he is tackling. Some people might say that all his work is about the same thing. And, yes, it is: It is about human beings."

Genty's productions have never been very big on story or explanations. Only a small number of words are spoken in the whole of *La Fin des Terres*, with the visual language of the stage and the bodies of the performers used as the main media of communication.

"Philippe Genty ... is here to invite you on a trip somewhere. He gives you some tools and it is up to you to use those tools. It is up to you if you want to stay sitting and looking at the show or whether you want to enter into it," Doukali said.