

Waterlogged in Red Hook with Polybe + Seats

by Hillary Miller

The waters of South Brooklyn have long been a popular place to consider the kinship between human and marine life. An article in the January 27, 1851 edition of the *Brooklyn Eagle* begins with a peculiar update: “The Merman who was captured in Gowanus Bay last summer and found to be a man who lived on the beach and had become a fish by being continually in and about the water, has now nearly returned to his pristine form.” Against his true nature, the Merman had recently attempted to escape back to his adopted element, until “his avarice got the better of his aquatic propensities,” and he floated back to shore with some floating timber.

Said to resemble a codfish, the Merman ate only clams and enjoyed smoking cigars (with witnesses reporting that the smoke could be seen rising from behind his gills). The writer mocks the Merman (and recommends him to the great Barnum), but the sadness behind the story can’t be obscured; transformed by his affinity with the sea, the “critter” remains stranded between two worlds. A more modern tale of nautical woe will emerge from the foamy waters of Red Hook this Spring, with *A Thousand Thousand Slimy Things*—the first full theatrical production to take place at the Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge, docked at Pier 44.

This watery extravaganza—conceived by the Brooklyn-based experimental theater company Polybe + Seats—has been in the making for three years. Inspired by the Weeki Wachee Springs Mermaid Park—one of our country’s oldest roadside attractions—the work is the brainchild of Artistic Director Jessica Brater, who also sits in the director’s chair on this show. Two different news stories spurred the work: one recounted a campaign to save the mermaid theme park from extinction, and another sounded warning bells about the potential collapse of the global fishing market.

True to the group’s approach to creative collaboration, Brater, writer Katya Schapiro, and Associate Company members threw themselves headlong into a fact-finding mission on the broad topic of the changing ocean environment and humanity’s relationship to it.

“When the company researches over an extended period of time,” explains Brater, “it gives us an embodied knowledge that allows us to make choices about everything from acting to props to graphic design that are informed by our understanding of the subject matter.” Together, they embarked on a lengthy rehearsal process that resulted in the upcoming “aquatic spectacular of conservation and change.”

In their version of the Weeki Wachee story, Robyn, the Mayor of the town and manager of the park, wages a campaign to save the park from closure with the help of her team of mermaids. Throw in a marooned explorer, a sea captain, a chorus of scientists, and "the mad mermaid of the gyre," Miranda, and you have an unlikely exploration of the limits and longings of ecological consciousness. The park may be saved, but will it be drowned in plastic? "The struggle to save Weeki Wachee," explains Schapiro, "is a parallel conservation story for the encroachment of plastic garbage, mutation, and rising tides that are quickly making sure that nothing, even basic body chemistry, will stay the same for the human species."

If you're worried, don't be—this isn't the preachy environmentalist tract that you might fear; it's a science fiction fantasia, and it's not looking to provide easy answers. Structurally, the play mirrors the interaction found in ecosystems, at once interlocking and oceanic. The final script is a multi-layered pastiche, one that retains the contributions of each company member who had a hand in developing it. Ultimately, their research snaked its way into the script in the form of borrowed text from interviews, literature (from Herman Melville to Rachel Carson to Hans Christian Andersen to the bloggers of the Algalita Marine Research Foundation), scientific articles, and popular songs, all united under Schapiro's sensibilities and voice.

Polybe + Seats has been perfecting its philosophy towards functional and happy collaboration since 2001, and the leadership structure—Catherine Wallach (Producing Director), Miriam Felton-Dansky (Associate Artistic Director), along with Brater and Schapiro—is supported by Associate Company members and a roster of mentors, including David Herskovits (of Target Margin Theater) and Ruth Maleczek and Sharon Fogarty (of Mabou Mines). This latest work maintains the careful attention to language and image that has been a cornerstone of the group's ethos since its inception—its founding members unabashedly claim the dramatic theories and writings of Gertrude Stein as a primary influence.

Floods, chlorine side effects, evolution; the mysterious and dynamic text of the play does bear Stein's unique stamp in its experiments with language and repetition, while asking us to consider what we *really* mean when we say that nature is alive, or refer to the "natural world." The actors seem to get it—as they swivel and swirl and suffer from the lack of chlorophyll, they evoke strange plant-mammals. Hybridity between humans and their marine ecology is the order of the day.

Indeed, when it comes to *A Thousand Thousand Slimy Things*, the company seems unable to escape water imagery of all sorts. In a splash of serendipity, their rented rehearsal space on Court Street is outfitted with six low circular windows that give the distinct sensation of being in a ship's quarters. At a recent rehearsal, the creative team moved through a scene, the dialogue strewn with references to marine life, propelled by the material of plastic, the primary change agent in the play.

The gang hasn't lost sight of the myriad goals behind the project, and the location of the production draws attention to the waterfront's unique urban history (as well as the Barge's contribution to it), which has lately been getting a PR boost. The Gowanus Canal's Superfund designation put our fair waterway in the news quite regularly, and the smart and surprising "Hall of the Gowanus" is now a permanently installed mini-museum at the Proteus Gowanus Gallery.

That they happened upon the Barge as a performance space wasn't just thanks to savvy location scouting, but rather the web of connections that links Brooklyn's performing arts community. Schapiro previously worked for Dance Theatre Etcetera, a performing arts organization headquartered across the street from the Barge. Through DTE's Executive Director, Martha Bowers, Schapiro got to know the proprietor of the Barge, David Sharps. "When the time came for us to find a place to do *Slimy Things*, we couldn't think of a more appropriate location." It didn't take much coaxing to get director Brater to agree: "We'd seen the wonderful circus put on by Sharps at the Waterfront Museum, and when we realized last spring that it was important to perform the play near the water, the Barge immediately came to mind."

Bobbing gently atop of the waters of Red Hook, the Barge is New York Harbor's last working wooden cargo vessel. It serves as a worthy site for the play's theme, conveyed by every aspect of the production's design: *we are water*. The production—which reaches the Barge just in time for Earth Day—boasts a set composed entirely of reclaimed objects. Brater explains, "Early on we made the decision to make our set out of reused plastic material and the juxtaposition between the inorganic plastic and the homey, earthy feeling inside the Barge will be a big part of the performance experience."

During a recent rehearsal, an actor proudly displayed his latest contribution: a large, rectangular piece of pink plastic, ordinarily used to pack computer servers. Giddy from their new find, the company quickly pulled it into the scene as a prop to mark the water line. On the sidelines of the rehearsal space, four large bags of their collected trash sat awaiting a second life as stage accoutrements. (According to Brater, they began running the items through the dishwasher after an unpleasant ant infestation.)

Yet in their contribution to the growing genre of ecological theater, the company is insistent about going beyond artifice. Schapiro notes that the past year saw the Maldives government holding a cabinet meeting underwater, the mass movements and disappointments of the COP15 talks on climate change in Copenhagen—where the Little Mermaid hails from—and "an increasingly matter-of-fact world discussion of issues such as climate debt and climate refugees." Brater agrees that their interest is not merely in passively reflecting on these issues. "Earth Day began as a holiday to celebrate the earth, to think about taking care of the earth, and to remind us and inspire us to take action. Because our company expresses itself through theater, this is our contribution to this conversation and our way of marking this holiday."

As was the case with many of Polybe + Seats' prior works, *A Thousand Thousand Slimy Things* can be said to be more of an experience than a play. Brater is contemplative as she stands at the cusp of a production that has been years in the making. "We've been spending a lot of time over the past several years thinking about the climate as we've been making this piece, and now we are inviting our audiences to come spend some time thinking about the climate with us; what it is, what it could be, and what our place is in it."

A THOUSAND THOUSAND SLIMY THINGS: An Aquatic Spectacular of Conservation and Change, April 23-May 9th, Friday-Sunday at 7pm; All tickets \$18 through SmartTix; at

The Waterfront Museum and Showboat Barge Red Hook, Brooklyn. For more info, please visit polybeandseats.org/slimy.html.

About the Author

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