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Manhattan Puppetry

by **Deidre McFadyen**

Eliza's Window reviewed July 30, 2005

Eliza's Window, Natalie Burgess's

captivating puppet play with music, illustrates how children's theater can edify even as it entertains.

The hourlong play, being staged on Saturday afternoons through August by Paper City Productions in Manhattan Theatre Source's tiny second-story theater near Washington Square Park, is unapologetically moral without coming off as preachy, thanks to its wry humor and generosity of spirit.

The play follows the puppet Eliza, a depressed, wheelchair-bound girl whose well-to-do parents have recently split up, as she gradually learns from a parade of wise animals and spirits that money and what your friends think of you are less important than discovering your own song and appreciating the unique music that others make.



Creator and director Burgess, who spent three years at the Central Park Zoo as a performer, songwriter, and puppeteer, manages also to demystify music and music making for kids. As one of the musicians instructs Eliza about composing a song, "It's as easy as 1-2-3-4."

Eliza's Window can be enjoyed by the entire family. Burgess does not talk kid talk. She rightly assumes that children will stick with a compelling story that is imaginatively rendered and well paced, even if some of the jokes and big words go sailing over their heads en route to the parents in the audience.

The play might not travel well, however, since so much of the story is New York-centric, whether it's the running subplot about Pale Male, the Central Park red-tailed hawk, or Eliza's

suggestions that the turtle looking for the "pond of plenty" check out Rockefeller Center, and that the rabbit seeking a garden head to a certain basketball arena.

Every element of the play has been carefully conceived, crafted, and executed, from the whimsical set design and puppets to the engaging songs. Burgess and the three other cast members—all recent New York University graduates—bring their characters to life and create some pleasing music.

Using papier-mâché, Burgess has constructed a leafy building façade with two windows, one an open ledge on which the puppets perch and a second filled in with a screen for shadow puppets. Her handcrafted puppets evoke an earlier era. Eliza and Edwin have Punch and Judy-like features and wear old-fashioned garments, while Pale Male is represented by an outsized beaked head and diminutive wings. The shadow puppets of rabbit, turtle, and Eliza's dad are delicate cutouts. Burgess's least-resonant creations are those in which the puppeteers in costume and mask emerge from behind the ledge.

The songs, performed by Burgess on guitar and Isabel Steuble-Johnson on fiddle, have been seamlessly woven into the story's fabric. During the final song, one wee audience member was dancing in her chair.

By play's end, Eliza stops lying to her classmates to conceal her parents' breakup, grasps the liberating power of make-believe, and makes amends with Edwin, a poor boy whom she'd made fun of earlier for being different. The wistful song she ultimately composes, "If I Could Fly," reflects Burgess's view that sadness is a part of life and expressing it can be the first step to feeling better.

To cap the afternoon, the children in the audience were invited to come to the lobby afterward to see the puppets up close. For a few exhilarating moments, they could pretend to be the puppeteers.



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ELIZA'S WINDOW

Manhattan Theater Source

Category: Puppet Theater

Written by: Natalie Burgess

Directed by: none

Produced by: Paper City Productions

Opens: July 9, 2005

Closes: August 27, 2005

Running Time: 1 hour

Theater: Manhattan Theater Source

Address: 177 MacDougal St
New York, NY 10011

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BOX OFFICE

Tickets: \$12.00
none

Phone: (212) 352-0255

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CREDITS

Creative Team

Written by: Natalie Burgess

Directed by: Natalie Burgess

Produced by: Paper City Productions in conjunction with the Paddywhack Players

Puppet and set design and construction:
Natalie Burgess

Cast

Sarah Bellantoni as Eliza
Isabel Steuble-Johnson
as Edwin
Caitlin Heibach as
Dad/Pale
Male/Rabbit/Turtle/Spirit
of Central Park/The
Ambassador
Natalie Burgess on guitar
Isabel Steuble-Johnson
on violin

Crew

Stage Manager: Jay
Diminich