



An odd photographer is animated by Tom Lee, in "Disfarmer."

Ice Cream, Beer and Art

The reclusive life of an American eccentric is examined in scrupulous, sometimes strange detail in "Disfarmer," an exquisitely designed but conceptually thin new puppet-theater work from Dan Hurlin at St. Ann's Warehouse.

**CHARLES
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**THEATER
REVIEW**

Although the subject of this languid meditation on a curious man certainly qualifies as an original — Mike Disfarmer made up his name, claimed to have been born of a tornado and apparently spent a lot of time measuring his feet — the daily rounds of his life depicted onstage are almost numbingly trivial. He drinks a beer. He runs some errands. He nods off while composing a letter. He drinks another beer. That the figure engaging in these behaviors is a small bunraku-style puppet artfully manipulated by one or more puppeteers does not, I'm afraid, make the activities more compelling.

Mike Disfarmer does also fiddle

ONLINE: PHOTO MAN

▶ A video excerpt from
"Disfarmer":

nytimes.com/theater

around in a darkroom. He was a real-life notable in the history of American photography, after all. Living in a small Arkansas town in the first half of the 20th century he ran a photo studio in which locals came to have their images recorded for family albums or just for fun. In the 1970s about 4,000 of his negatives turned up, and he was hailed as a lost master of the studio portrait and an important chronicler of rural America. More recently two exhibitions of Disfarmer's vintage prints have enhanced his legacy.

The script, by Sally Oswald, combines original writing with texts drawn from the skimpy historical record. In the opening minutes we hear a radio address adapted from a newspaper report about how Disfarmer came by his strange name.

"Mr. Mike Meyer, well known to locals as the town's portrait photographer, wants to be called Mike Disfarmer," the announcer says. "He claims that as a small child he was kidnapped by a tornado: ripped from his birth parents, flying nine miles clear across the state of Indiana till he landed in a heap in the Meyer family home." He also claimed that since Meyer was German for farmer, and he was definitely not a farmer, Disfarmer was the one and only handle for him. (Meyer does not mean farmer in German, but you don't argue logic with an eccentric.)

Mr. Hurlin, who conceived, designed and directed the show, also narrates Disfarmer's disjointed interior monologue, which constitutes much of the text. His flat, ordinary monotone ideally suits the droning activity that fills Disfarmer's days but also adds a deadpan comic edge to the stranger passages, like the letter Disfarmer writes to his "foster" nephew elaborately insisting that they are not related at all, or the twister-related non sequiturs: "If it sounds like a train is coming, it could also be a tornado"; "If someone knocks on your door, it could be a tornado."

But aside from these curiosities and obsessions — and the foot-measuring, which goes unexplained — Disfarmer's life, as examined here, makes for a pretty waning evening of theater. Mr. Hurlin's wonderfully realized sets fas-

Disfarmer

Conceived, directed and designed by Dan Hurlin; music by Dan Moses Schreier; text by Sally Oswald; created by the Ensemble; lighting by Tyler Micoeau; costumes by Anna Thomford; film sequence by David Soll. Produced by MAPP International Productions, Ann Rosenthal, executive director and producer; Cathy Zimmerman, co-director and producer. At St. Ann's Warehouse, 38 Water Street, at Dock Street, Dumbo, Brooklyn, (866) 811-4111. Through Sunday. Running time: 1 hour 20 minutes.

WITH: Dan Hurlin (Narrator); Matt Acheson, Chris M. Green, Tom Lee, Darius Mannino and Eric Wright (Puppeteers).

ciate with the exactness of their detail. Each stripe on each miniature carton of chocolate ice cream can be discerned from the fifth row. The opening sequence, depicting a tornado sweeping across a plain, tossing trees and houses, cows and pigs in the air, is particularly delightful. The original score, by Dan Moses Schreier, is muted, folksy and handsome and is played vibrantly by Eric B. Davis on banjo, Justin Smith on violin and Guy Klucsevsek on accordion.

And the puppeteers — Matt Acheson, Chris M. Green, Tom Lee, Darius Mannino and Eric Wright — glide smoothly in black among the miniature period sets, lending their hands to the egg-headed Disfarmer puppet almost unnoticeably, bringing precisely observed truth to his smallest actions: the tired removal of his round eyeglasses, the wanderings in search of a beer bottle with a little liquid left in the bottom, a tantrum in the kitchen when the clock breaks down.

But the elaborately natural movement and evocative designs cannot wholly disguise the paucity of psychology, or narrative, or sociology in the show. It is somehow telling that we get a stronger impression of Disfarmer from a brief, funny sequence in which the locals testify to his oddities than we do from spending more than an hour watching him putter around and listening to the weird chatter inside his head.

Ultimately Mr. Hurlin's collage-like portrait never coheres into something sharp and lifelike. It feels a little precious, lacking the simple and pungent humanity that shines forth clearly from Disfarmer's photographs.