

PRESS REVIEWS

The Charlotte Observer

For the Phffft Company, sand played a more serious role. When Cyrus Khambatta (artistic director and performer) unplugged a sand-bag hanging overhead, the persistent stream of sand melted him, his pretensions of civilization, his humanity, until he was a primal lizard slinking on its dusty grains. Then sand, 4-6 inches deep, transformed the entire stage into some other-worldly landscape, on which the four-member troupe played out a frenzied, whirling, disturbing metaphor for modern life.

The evening length piece, "Smile, America," was at once clever, amusing and unsettling. With a sound collage of commercial jingles, TV theme songs and familiar voices ("...so I am not a crook"), it managed to condemn our entire consumer culture, even linking Madison Avenue and organized religion. Yet it still drew laughs from the packed house.

Vignettes included: A grueling fight and amazing acrobatics between two tie-wearing yuppies; a frantic battle over cereal boxes, shampoo bottles and dime-store toys; the struggle of a woman against marionette-like tethers, which stretched dramatically from her wrists and ankles into the rafters...the work's scathing satire hit its marks.

El Tiempo Latino

You probably think this small verse means nothing, but it is unearthed watching *Charlie and the Red Balloon* presented April 17th at the Gunston Arts Center under the artistic direction of Cyrus Khambatta.

The work is by the Phffft! group, who has performed in Europe, South America and of course the U.S., at, among others The Avignon Festival in France and The Spoleto Festival. The Venezuelan company, Pisorrojo participated in this presentation. Together, the two groups have presented artistic exchanges and performances internationally since 1997.

Charlie and the Red Balloon is from experimental theater and is a contemporary fable inspired by known children's stories like: *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *The Wizard of Oz*, *Alice and Wonderland* and *The Red Balloon*. It takes place in a colony created on the moon where a six year old child arrives named, Charlie, who then has to confront a mechanized society which has lost its human values, especially that of communication. As the adventures of Charlie

The red balloon of my desires passed from hand to hand, with it my dreams went, with it my soul remained unravel, we realize that innocence is fragile and subject to evil forces.

This imaginative work is accompanied by original music from Michelle Kinney. Although its message is for adults, its red balloons, bodies aloft, flying and floating in space, spies doing karate and a creative use of technology, make this work special. And you might even be involved.

The Phffft! Company presents a satirical and humorous vision of the human condition, exploring extremes of American culture in a choreographic context; inviting the audience to reflect on contemporary issues of personal, political and social nature.

The opening and closing image is of an old man carrying a balloon, in the beginning of the piece, Charlie receives it and at the end it is he who passes it on to another child. The red balloon has many meanings: dreams, communication, feelings, or perhaps all of these, because that is what distinguishes man from machines.

- Angela