

Preview: The Fourth Wall at Kendal at Oberlin

By Daniel Hautzinger



There's an old vaudeville one-liner popularly attributed to Groucho Marx that goes, "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." The mental gymnastics, upended expectation, and absurdity of the joke make it a fitting source for "Fruit Flies Like a Banana," the title of hybrid arts ensemble The Fourth Wall's "sprint-triathlon variety show." They will present the show on Wednesday, August 27 at 7:15PM in Kendal at Oberlin's Heiser Auditorium.

Mental gymnastics: The Fourth Wall is a flute-trombone-percussion trio who combine music with texts and choreography, redefining traditional notions of a concert experience. **Upended expectations:** "Fruit Flies Like a Banana" features twenty pieces ranging in length and seriousness and performed in a random order in sixty minutes, so that even the ensemble can't predict how it's going to go. (The first part of the one-liner is appropriate in light of the time limit). **And absurdity:** "Sometimes a stupid idea or just a random joke becomes an important element of a piece as we create it," said Fourth Wall trombonist C. Neil Parsons. "We jump on any idea that seems interesting."

The show was inspired by "Too Much Light Makes the Baby Go Blind," a show by the Chicago theater company The Neo-Futurists in which thirty plays are performed in an hour. It includes a wide variety of pieces, Parsons explained. "Some are participatory, so we get the audience involved. Some of them are shorter, like a dumb trick that we do. Some of them are longer, like pieces of chamber music. The variety show format supports radical shifts in tone and genre, wherein artful expression and deep listening can exist side by side with humor and slapstick. We just try to find interesting things. Being who we are, the things we find interesting are eclectic."

Such a range of material provides both a broad appeal and a unique experience. “We have found that this approach works for any audience,” Parsons said. “There are people who are interested in hearing us play great music, and people who are attracted to the theatrical nature of it, who would not otherwise go to a chamber music recital . Everyone has a certain buy-in, but we feel that the juxtaposition of material prepares everyone for everything else.”

It’s noteworthy that the order of pieces in the show is determined by an audience member’s choice from a deck of cards, because audience engagement is an important part of The Fourth Wall’s mission. “Even in a formal concert, we seek a close rapport [with the audience], ‘breaking the fourth wall’ to better connect them to the music we play. In “Fruit Flies Like a Banana,” we invite them to participate, and they become our co-conspirators. Our goal is to expand the expressive palette of instrumental music, by integrating art forms and by including audiences in our process,” Parsons said.

To that end, The Fourth Wall also conducts workshops, usually for musicians, on communicating with audiences, among other things. (At Kendal, they will give an interactive one on “making contemporary music” at 2PM).

“We use games from the theater world or techniques that actors and dancers use and apply them to how musicians should think while onstage,” said Hilary Abigana, the ensemble’s flutist. “Things like staying in the moment and being really in tune with your fellow musicians.”

“You can’t just say ‘I’m going to do a concert and play every single note correct, and to hell with the audience,” added Greg Jukes, percussionist of the ensemble. “That’s not how it works. We want to see ‘Hybrid Arts’ become more mainstream. If you’re learning a piece of music, why not find a text that sets it up well, or add some choreography, or even just acknowledge the fact that people are watching you play it and consider better stage presence.”

The Fourth Wall certainly has an active stage presence, utilizing both choreographed movement and dance. “We all have a lot of dance training,” Parsons said. “Hilary can dance en pointe. In a rehearsal one day, we decided as a group that ‘wouldn’t it be cool...’”

That hanging statement is a good summation of The Fourth Wall’s entire approach. Wouldn’t it be cool... to break the fourth wall, where fruit flies like a banana?

The Fourth Wall’s workshop and performance of “Fruit Flies Like a Banana” in the Heiser Auditorium at Kendal at Oberlin are free and open to the public. It’s requested

that you email Larry Dunn at acornled@gmail.com or call him at (440)-420-9624 if you plan on attending the 2:00 pm workshop.

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