

Review: Fourth Wall hybrid arts ensemble at Kendal at Oberlin (August 27)

by Mike Telin



There's a famous one-liner popularized by Groucho Marx: "Time flies like an arrow; fruit flies like a banana." On August 27 in Kendal at Oberlin's Heiser Auditorium, [The Fourth Wall hybrid arts ensemble](#) brilliantly brought the absurdity of the joke to life during a thrilling, high-energy performance of their one-hour variety show, "Fruit Flies Like a Banana."

All jokes aside, The Fourth Wall (Hilary Abigana, flute, Neil Parsons, bass trombone and Greg Jukes, percussion) are excellent musicians who have a uncanny ability for intelligently combining a variety of musical styles with the spoken word and just enough off-the-wall (no pun intended) choreography to keep things interesting and thoroughly entertaining.

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, "Fruit Flies Like a Banana" features twenty pieces performed in sixty minutes. Once the sixty minutes has been set on the clock, the performance order of the twenty pieces is determined by the audience members, who are asked to select a card from a deck, each card bearing a title. The humorous title on the evening's first card was "How to Dance like A Pip." Once it was established that a Pip referred to the Gladys Knights back-up group, The Fourth Wall danced into a medley of popular music from the 1970's featuring *Stayin' Alive*; *I will Survive*; *Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head*; *Smoke on the Water*; *American Pie* and *Shake Your Booty*, among others. The capacity audience was invited to join the fun during *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*.

“It’s fun to pull out Bach’s organ” features a beautiful arrangement of the composer’s *Prelude and Fugue in d minor*. However, it was the inventive choreography complete with the twirling around of a vibraphone that made the piece work. Above all, as ridiculous as it may sound, the movement actually did fit the music. “What would Brian Boitano do?” found Hillary Abigana and Neil Parsons sliding across the stage on swivel stools as Greg Jukes added his own choreography, playing vibraphone, while the trio performed “Skating” from *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

On the funny side, the evening also included “The Flexitone is a versatile instrument” set to *Over the Rainbow*, and “Four Tone Theory,” during which *Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star* was sung to the notes D-sharp, A-flat, E and F. “How to spell onomatopoeia” was brought to life through rhythmic recitations of words like snap, slam, clang and crash, which of course ended with the popping of a balloon.

There were also many “serious” moments during the hour. Composer Davide Ianni’s *Trasparenze d’ Accent* for flute, prepared bass trombone and percussion, written for and premiered by the Fourth Wall, is an aurally engaging work consisting exclusively of extended techniques. The audience became a chorus during Pauline Oliveros’s *Tuning Meditation*, which was given the appropriate title “Everyone is a Musician.”

Other serious standouts included “Protest Songs Never Lose their Relevance,” with music by Frederic Rzewski, and a lush arrangement of “Hands, Eye, and Heart” from Vaughan Williams’s *Four Last Songs*, which was given the title “How to get home after the Trojan War.”

Without a doubt, the evening’s highlight was Modest Mussorgsky’s “Byldo” (ox cart) from *Pictures at an Exhibition*. With the creative title, “How to do Manual Labor,” Abigana abandoned her flute in favor of an accordion, while percussionist Jukes, down on all fours, carried Parsons, who was playing tenor tuba, across the stage on his back. And in true Fourth Wall fashion, it couldn’t be left at that. The piece ended with Abigana lying back-to-back on top of Jukes, who was now pulling everyone, including the vibraphone, off stage. The oddest part is that this was an exceptional performance of a great arrangement of Mussorgsky’s music.

The evening’s delightful encore, Bach’s *Prelude in G*, with the title “Boom Whackers,” was performed by the players hitting various lengths of PVC pipes on the floor.

The Fourth Wall Ensemble has a wonderful sense of humor and deserves credit for not shying away from going out into left field. And because they are so well trained in the disciplines of music and movement, they have no need to dumb anything down. To the contrary, they take everything to another level. It’s easy to understand why they are

quickly becoming so popular on the national Fringe Festival circuit. Hopefully they will make a return visit to Northeast Ohio soon.

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