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Theater & art

With 'Squirrel Stole My Underpants,' a performer reshapes her career

By Karen Campbell | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT JANUARY 25, 2013



JONATHAN WIGGS/GLOBE STAFF

Bonnie Duncan's all-ages solo show, "Squirrel Stole My Underpants," combines puppetry, mime, dance, and original music.

The catalysts for life transitions come in many shapes and guises. For Bonnie Duncan, it was an underwear-stealing squirrel.

After years as a performer — dancer, acrobat, actor, puppeteer — Duncan found herself home alone full time with twin infants, a toddler, an abiding curiosity, and a rampant imagination. Feeling the urge to somehow get back into the world of performance, she struck on the idea of using her skill set to create her first all-ages solo show, and “Squirrel Stole My Underpants” was born. The roughly 35-minute production, in which Duncan portrays a lonely young girl named Sylvie, combines puppetry, mime, dance, and original music. Aimed at ages 3 and up, it premieres at Brookline’s Puppet Showplace Theatre Saturday through Feb. 3.

Duncan, 37, calls the piece “a poignantly silly adventure tale for families” that begins when a squirrel snatches Sylvie’s favorite undergarment from the backyard clothes line, sending the girl on a magical journey to get it back. “She faces challenges and meets creatures who help her, but she has to find the strength and courage in herself,” Duncan says. “I love silly things, but I also feel that only works when there’s some humanity involved and is something kids growing up in the real world can really relate to.”

The Jamaica Plain artist’s creative flair is best known from her eight years as a dancer and education outreach director with Snappy Dance Theater and as half of the duo They Gotta Be Secret Agents, which she formed with fellow Snappy dancer Tim Gallagher in 2007 after that company folded. Duncan also taught theater arts for 12 years at the Cambridge Montessori School. “It was very hectic,” she recalls. “I was always teaching, dancing, tours all over the country, rehearsing three or four days a week.”

Duncan and Gallagher were working on Secret Agents’ best-known piece, “Poste Restante,” when she got pregnant with her first child, Jack Ozro, now almost 4. They put the work on hold while Duncan was pregnant and “learning how to be a mom,” then premiered it when her son was 6 months old, touring to California, New York, and Europe, with the tiny boy in tow. “I was still teaching, I had one kid, a show, and a job, and I thought that’s just about right,” she says.

But when twins Rex and Adelaide arrived on the scene, life became significantly more complicated. “I had to reevaluate everything,” Duncan says.

She took a year off to devote to family, a transition she found eye-opening. “It taught me to be patient,” she says. “Just the details of getting up, getting everyone out of the house, getting groceries.” A typical day involved a lot of nursing and napping. But anytime the kids were asleep, Duncan tried to stay engaged — baking, reading, watching videos. “I loved being home with the kids, but I felt like I needed something for myself and to contribute something different to the world. As a new mother, I felt a little lost in my body and who I thought I was, but I knew that was still inside of me.”

Then Duncan got the idea for a solo show. She’d been making and performing with her own puppets for almost 15 years, mostly doing adult puppet slams, when a friend suggested she create a children’s show. “It sounded exciting to make a show I could perform for families and [one that might] become a job where you can actually make some money, maybe cover my child care.”

After brainstorming with her husband, Dan Milstein, founding artistic director of Boston’s Rough & Tumble theater company, she hit upon the concept of a show about something being stolen. Duncan’s original title was “Squirrel Stole My Underwear,” but Puppet Showplace Theatre artistic director Roxanna Myhrum convinced her “underpants” was funnier, and so it became.

“That’s my main contribution,” Myhrum says with a laugh, though in fact her organization is the fiscal sponsor for a 2013 grant Duncan got from the Jim Henson Foundation and has supported the production’s development with performance and rehearsal space, and by arranging feedback and in-progress presentations.

Myhrum says there has been an explosion of birthday party requests for the show, just based on the title. “There’s a saying in the puppet world that you can do anything you want as long as it’s titled ‘Cinderella,’” she says. “But this title invites people in, and it is not just bringing fairy-tale characters to life, but is something very different. And it’s hilarious.”

Local musicians Brendan Burns and Tony Leva have composed music for the show, which they will play at some performances. Scored for guitar, upright bass, and music box, it ranges from swing and ragtime to soundscapes. Milstein is the show’s director.

“We spend a lot of nights between 10 and 11 rehearsing in our playroom,” Duncan says. “Developing this show was one of the hardest artistic processes I’ve ever experienced because there are so many variables. If the kids get sick, you lose two weeks of work. As a parent, you learn it’s the outside stuff you can’t control, but it’s a steep learning curve.”

Duncan hopes this reinvention of her artistic career becomes a flexible source of income if she can tap into programming by small theaters, festivals, camps, and schools. She’s already booked in March (and her family’s planning to come along) at Goat on a Boat Puppet Theatre in Sag Harbor, N.Y. She is also working on a new piece with another puppeteer-movement artist in Austin, Texas, and she and Gallagher are hoping to continue their collaborations, though he is now in medical school in New York.

For “Squirrel Stole My Underpants,” Duncan designed and sewed all the puppets herself. Materials for scene changes emerge from a laundry basket. A nightgown becomes a rippled ocean. Tattered flannel shirts evoke an evil forest. The squirrel’s tree is fashioned of corduroy trousers with leaves of — you guessed it — underpants.

“All of it is handmade on purpose,” Duncan explains, “so kids can see how I use familiar materials in different ways. I want them to think, ‘I can totally make that.’ I hope it arouses that underlying curiosity of childhood. I spent a lot of my childhood in my imaginary world, and I love that. I want that to be celebrated.”

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