



nytheatre in review by Martin Denton
published November 7, 2011

La MaMa opens its 50th(!) season with a new version of Ping Chong's *Angels of Swedenborg*, which is ostensibly about the conflict between man's spiritual and material existence, but is really an exploration and celebration of how theatrical forms of varying kinds can communicate meaning, feeling, and emotion. I won't admit to getting everything that was going on in this dance-based multimedia work, but I was never bored, was almost always entranced and/or enraptured, and often reached a kind of transcendence.

Angels plays out in fifteen scenes, all very different from one another in form and style. Almost always, Ping Chong gives us many many things to engage our senses: a dance plays out center stage, for example, while a complimentary sequence occurs off to the side, strange and wondrous imagery is projected on a screen behind, an LCD display flashes text, and music plays on the theater's sound system.

I think every audience member will be pulled in by something different among the panoramic sequence of images and effects. My favorite moments involved a wind-up penguin toy and a constantly shifting set of maps projected on the wall.

Ping Chong's collaborators here include choreographer John Fleming, designers Watoku Ueno, Stefani Mar, Michael Chybowski, Brian Hallas, and Jan Harley, and performers Charlotte Braithwaite, Maura Nguyen Donohue, George Drance, Sara Galassini, Renouard Gee, Henning Hegland, Laurence Martin, Allison Piamondon, Eugene the Poogene, Simeon Pollydore, Federico Restrepo, and Perry Yung. All exemplify the spirit of the Great Jones Repertory Company (presenters of this show) and La MaMa itself: that diversity and imagination can touch us with purity and clarity.

Part of the time I wished for a synopsis to guide me through the often-obscure intentions of *Angels* (for example, it would have been cool to know that the unrecognizable language projected on screen in an early scene was Esperanto). But thinking back on the experience, I think it was best not to be led through it with too much structure or formality; *Angels of Swedenborg*, in contemplating humanity's essence, lets us play constantly with the senses and instincts that most make us human.

A very fitting beginning for La MaMa's golden anniversary season.