

Blind Cinema steps outside conventional ways of storytelling, relying on senses

Explores relationship between language, experience

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COVINGTON -- The audience members put on their blindfolds and prepare for the show. What's coming? They have no idea.

The theater is already dark, but with the aid of the blindfolds, it's now pitch-black. Assured they cannot see anything, producers lead the children in, one by one, to sit behind the crowd. They pick up their whispering devices – small cones that allow them to communicate with the adults in front of them – and they start to watch the screen.

What follows is Blind Cinema, where children watch a film that has music – but no dialogue. The children are then responsible for whispering what is happening to the blindfolded adults. Sometimes they succeed, while other times, the children struggle to describe what they're seeing.



Children use whispering cones to communicate to adults who are blindfolded during the Blind Cinema experience. Provided

“The piece hopefully touches upon the struggle or paradox at the heart of this relationship between language and experience,” said Blind Cinema creator Britt Hatzius. “On the one hand, that it can only and ever remain approximated – there’s never a ‘successful’ or ‘correct’ way, that we all see, think, articulate differently. But on the other, there is a notion of responsibility both to ourselves

and to others of sharing through language: That we try, even if at times we are ‘at a loss’ for words.”

Three times throughout the performance, the children switch seats, which ensures that audience members receive three different experiences. It becomes what the organizers call a “shared investment.” With each audience member and child using his or her imagination, each gets a different story.

Co-presented with Mini Microcinema, performances will be held at The Carnegie’s Otto M Budig Theater in Covington starting Sept. 28, and Hatzius will work with students from four area elementary schools to prepare them for the experience. One of those schools is The New School Montessori on Burton Woods Lane.

“The New School Montessori has fostered a community and culture of innovation and progressive ideas for over 45 years,” said Jeff Groh, director of the school. “A recent example is a partnership with the Contemporary Arts Center to participate in Blind Cinema.

“Britt Hatzius will conduct a two-hour workshop with 9- to 12-year-old students from The New School Montessori to prepare them for an interactive performance that shifts the power balance between adults and children while honoring imagination and descriptive language over images.”

Groh said he knew the project would parallel The New School’s ideals.

“The New School’s progressive community of parents, students, alumni and staff continue to deepen the role that education, arts and children play in our society,” Groh said.

Hatzius, who hails from London, said the idea for Blind Cinema came from a desire to strip everything away from what she calls our “visually dominated culture of media overload.”

“Partly out of a frustration with (that) and the desire to strip everything back to a minimum,” Hatzius said. “It’s based on the practice of audio description for the blind. The children watch the movie for the first time, finding themselves in a similar position as the audience, not knowing what to expect.”

Hatzius, who has a background in visual arts, said she has always enjoyed working with different media. But over her career she’s become particularly interested in the live aspect of her work.

“I’m above all interested in exploring ideas around language, interpretation and the potential for discrepancies, ruptures, deviations and miscommunication when confronted with experiences, visual or otherwise,” Hatzius said. “In Blind Cinema the audience is asked to imagine a movie based on the children’s fragmentary descriptions.”

The performance has earned rave reviews in Europe.

“I utterly enjoyed working together with Britt Hatzius,” said Hannes Van Wynendaele, a teacher at Belgium’s Freinetschool De Harp school.

“Throughout several well-constructed workshops she demonstrated a very natural, calm and patient way of communicating with the kids that put them at ease and gave them the confidence to eventually perform.

“Simultaneously she never lost sight of the bigger picture, had eye for even the smallest details and stayed true to her concept. That combination resulted in an amazing performance during which I felt very vulnerable, but also very focused.”

Van Wynendaele said the overall process was surprising.

“In the process of putting together the fragmented pieces of information I received, I was surprised by how used I was to a conventional way of storytelling and was confronted with the limitations of my own imagination,” Van Wynendaele said. “At the same time I was amazed by the differences between children when it comes to describing an image, stressing the uniqueness of every person. Afterwards, both the spectators and the performers really enjoyed the experience.”