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Picnic Tables for Dancing, Bookcases for Naps

By HELENE STAPINSKI

FROM a distance, the yellow clapboard house on Governors Island looks normal, with its pretty pink flowers, white gingerbread porch railing and wide side yard. But move a little closer, and you start to wonder.

A “family” of six is dancing in sync on the picnic table in the yard. Inside, a man and a woman are lying in fetal positions on the built-in bookshelves; and upstairs, another couple are practicing some moves inside a large closet.

This is what happens when Third Rail comes to visit.

Third Rail Projects, a New York dance and performance company, has a residency this summer on the island in one of the former officers’ residences — House No. 17 — and is inviting the public to watch its performers rehearse and develop their latest creation.

“Most people see bookshelves, and they think books,” said Joshua Reaver, one of the performers. “We think, ‘Good place to lie down.’”

The company is best known for its “Alice in Wonderland”-inspired “Then She Fell,” a theater experience that unfolds in an old parochial school in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, six nights a week.

The artistic directors — Tom Pearson, Zach Morris and Jennine Willett — set up house on the island early this month and will be on site with their 10 dancers and



PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOSHUA BRIGHT FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

ONLINE: **THIRD RAIL**

A look at the company in rehearsal:

nytimes.com/theater

“flow” of the house. (Because of collapsing ceilings, some rooms — including the kitchen and an upstairs bedroom — are off limits, with hand-drawn skull and crossbones signs taped to the doors.)

The peeling paint on the ceilings seemed to be spreading from one room to the next, “almost like an infection, creeping in and coming into the closets,” Ms. Willett said.

Mr. Morris added, “Maybe we can build that into the mythology of the house, that the sky is always falling.”

Strewed about the house were a wing chair, three life-size faux-Greek statues, a desk and an office chair, some toy guns, lanterns, Christmas lights, lampshades, dollhouse furniture, a neon Chinese food takeout sign and a chair with a skeletal spine where the backing should have been. All useful props. There is no running water, but there is electricity.

The creators were listening as the house spoke to them, to help tell them what the piece would become, they said. “We’re developing characters and material, trying to meet the space on its own terms,” Mr. Pearson said. “There’s something so self-contained and yet mysteri-



From top, a rehearsal on Governors Island of Third Rail Projects’ “Roadside Attraction,” which is about a family vacation in a 1978 camper; Tori Sparks, left, who plays the mother in “Roadside Attraction,” rehearsing; props for “House No. 17,” a work in development; Edward Rice, a dancer, getting to know a wall inside the house, a former officers’ residence; and performers from the company Third Rail Projects forging new relationships with the 135-year-old house’s built-in bookshelves.



singers, all of whom also perform in “Then She Fell,” until late September, giving the public a window into their creative process.

Two separate performances are underway. The yard piece, known as “Roadside Attraction,” toured last summer throughout the city and the state. Its story revolves around a dysfunctional family on vacation in a 1978 Coleman pop-up camper, which the cast hauls out of the Building 17 garage every Friday, sets up, then dances in and around.

The unhappy Mother character has an avatar, performed by Elizabeth Carena, who occasionally breaks into 1970s pop standards, helping attract an audience for the 45-minute show.

During a recent Friday rehearsal, a real family of four from Taiwan visiting Governors Island stopped to see what was happening. “We heard the singing, so we came and sat down,” said Brian Fan, who was touring New York with his mother, his wife and his daughter. They sat comfortably in the retro lawn chairs that Third Rail provided, chairs that Ms. Willett’s father had collected in Ohio and driven to New York. The traveling piece is based on her camper vacations as a child.

The second performance, the one going on inside the 135-year-old house, is a bit more abstract and in its larval stages. Four dancers were traveling through the usable seven rooms, past peeling eggshell paint and sparse furnishings, feeling the



ous about all these houses.” A Southern Gothic vibe was emerging, he said. He was rereading Faulkner’s “Light in August” for inspiration. Mr. Morris, however, saw the house as a creature unto itself, its two chimneys the horns of a Minotaur or some other misunderstood monster.

“We’re using the architecture and pulling the history from the house,” he said.

Upstairs, inside two closets with sliding doors, Mr. Reaver and a fellow dancer, Edward Rice, were engaged in an abstract striptease. A door would slide open and a shirt would appear on a hanger; the performers were off to the side, hidden. After a few beats, the door would close and then open again to reveal another piece of clothing, and so on, until, presumably, the dancers were naked, unseen by the audience.

At other times, they were writhing, fully clothed, along the grand hallway banister or swinging from upstairs landings and wedging themselves into the narrow servants’ staircase at the back of the house.

Though an original score is being developed by Sean Hagerty, who composed the music for “Then She Fell” and “Roadside Attraction,” the group was dancing, temporarily, to recordings of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone.

Eventually (though not this summer) the outside performance will meet the inside performance in an overall project called “End of the World.” The vacationing family will stumble upon the action of “House No. 17” along with the actual audience. “It’s meant to be a synonymous experience, where the audience and the family are all visitors and are all in this together,” Mr. Pearson said. While the dancers rehearsed, island visitors stopped their bikes, and sanitation crews pulled up their golf carts, craning their necks to see what was going on. A volunteer for Third Rail was stationed outside to explain (to a degree), discuss the schedule and hand out postcards.

Audience reaction has always helped inform the pieces that Third Rail produces. “Those little intersections with the audience help shape what we do,” Ms. Willett said. “We learn what works and what doesn’t.”

Governors Island, she said, was a perfect place for Third Rail. “This is one of the few places in New York City where artists can have the time and space to collaborate with a site and be in a conversation with the public,” she said. “It’s a perfect match, really.”

Island Time (With or Without Chair)

‘ROADSIDE ATTRACTION’ Open rehearsals on the green behind House No. 17 in Nolan Park, Friday and June 29, noon to 5 p.m. Performances July 6, 2 p.m. and 4 p.m. Visitors are invited to bring their own lawn chairs.

HOUSE NO. 17 Open studios July 5, Aug. 2 and 22, Sept. 13, 16 and 17, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m. Workshops (registration required) July 23 and Aug. 20, 1 p.m. to 5 p.m.

INFORMATION thirdrailprojects.com.

GOVERNORS ISLAND Ferries run daily from the Battery Maritime Building (at South and Whitehall Streets) in Lower Manhattan and on Saturdays and Sundays from Pier 6 in Brooklyn Bridge Park, at the foot of Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn. Round-trip fare is \$2 (some morning ferries are free); govisland.com.