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His string instruments

Erik Sanko once never wanted people to know about his hobby of puppetry. 'The Fortune Teller' has helped get the secret out.

By ROB KENDT
Special to The Times

ERIK SANKO burst onto the theatrical scene only a year ago with the beguilingly macabre marionette show "The Fortune Teller." And despite commissions from the Kronos Quartet and director Ping Chong, the 43-year-old musician/puppet maker still doesn't seem comfortable using a word like "showstopper," let alone calling himself a director.

But to visit the vividly antiquarian 15th-floor loft apartment in Tribeca he shares with his wife, Jessica Grindstaff, or just to witness this couple's beguiling notion of street clothes, is to recognize them as born show people — post-punk heirs to purveyors of raree shows and *wunderkammer*s.

"When I met Erik about 12 years ago, we started going to antique and oddity stores and realized we were into the same odd stuff — taxidermied things," said composer Danny Elfman, who co-wrote the sparkling score for "The Fortune Teller," which plays a sold-out run at UCLA's Freud Playhouse through Oct. 28. "I always considered myself a 19th century man living in the 20th century. Erik is that, but even more so — he's from some other place in the space-time continuum."

A rail-thin, impish man with spiky blond hair and a wardrobe that invariably includes long johns and suspenders, Sanko is not new to performing. The creepy marionettes that hang among the stuffed birds and shadow boxes in his apartment have long been an outlet to blow off steam from his day job: playing bass for the likes of the Lounge Lizards, John Cale and Yoko Ono, and as front man for his own band Skeleton Key.

"This was a secret of mine for many years," Sanko said of his puppets, which he first began making at the age of 10. "It was the thing I would do when I came home from gigs, and it gave me enormous pleasure. I would sit here at home with these puppets and a mirror and just play."

Occasionally the marionettes — constructed with a simple papier-mâché base called Celluloid and dressed with bits of vintage clothes — got trotted out for laughs at parties. But when his wife included them in an art show in Chelsea, their maker proved fiercely reluctant to give them a public life.

"For the closing party, the gallery owner suggested that maybe Erik do a puppet show. He had never done one before," said Grindstaff, clad in a billowy purple coat adorned with a vintage prize ribbon.

This took some convincing.

"You were really angry," she recalled to Sanko, who didn't dispute the characterization. "I remember fighting about it — you really, really didn't wanna do it. You were embarrassed and shy about it."

Eventually persuaded, Sanko put out a card table, made sets out of chipboard and recruited Cale to record a voice-over. A few placards and Web notices drew overflow crowds that demanded repeat performances.

"That's when I was first quoted as saying, 'Who knew? I guess like the puppets,'" said Sanko with a shrugging smile. Behind him sat a metal globe scrubbed of text, and barely visible in these reliquary environs, a slumbering computer monitor.

With grants from the Jim Henson Foundation and the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Sanko set to work on a show built around his puppets, most of them gaunt-looking men scant of hair and long of face.

The resulting hourlong fable, staged last fall at the intimate HERE Arts Center in downtown Manhattan, depicts a mysterious fortuneteller who gathers seven rogues in a Victorian dining room under the pretense of executing a rich man's will.

"Instead he forecasts the grim fate of each according to his deadly sin. And in rooms on either side of the main stage, these mortal ends are enacted in a style both pristine and lurid, simultaneously evoking George Gross and Edward Gorey. It's not exactly Punch and Judy or 'The Lonely Goatherd.'

"We always say that it's OK for New York kids," said Grindstaff of the show's suitability for family audiences.

"It's dark, but it's puppets," said Sanko.

"The thing that makes it dark is the moral-



ROBERT CAPLIN FOR THE TIMES

MANIPULATOR: "It was the thing I would do when I came home from gigs, and it gave me enormous pleasure," musician and puppet master Erik Sanko says.

THE DOWNTOWN THEATRE

'The Fortune Teller'

Where: Freud Playhouse, UCLA, Westwood

When: 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Fridays; 5, 7 and 9 p.m. Saturdays; 3, 5 and 7 p.m. Sunday; 3 and 5 p.m. Oct. 28

Ends: Oct. 28

Price: \$32

Contact: (310) 825-2101

it in." Grindstaff said. "It's about sloth and lust and greed, and those things are much darker than the eerie puppets and eerie sets."

Those puppets and sets are pretty rich nightmare food, though. Sanko demonstrated how he directs puppeteers to make his marionettes to tread slowly, deliberately, as if they're supporting their own weight. I try to think of them as tiny actors."

For her part, Grindstaff supervised a team of fellow artists and designers for months in constructing every detail on the one-third-scale set, including small canvas moneybags and wallpaper with a tiny crossed-guns print.

These details so mesmerize some audiences that they lose their sense of scale.

"At the end of the show we always invite people to come backstage and see how it all works, and one person went so far as to say, 'So these are models of the puppets — where are the real puppets?'" Sanko marveled. "People think the puppets are huge. They're shocked at how small they are."

More recently Sanko got the chance to

construct a shockingly large puppet. Asked to write music and create a puppet show for a Kronos Quartet appearance at the 900-seat Brooklyn Academy of Music, he was initially stumped for puppets of sufficient size and substance for what he jokingly called the "fancy-pants" honor of such a commission.

Then Grindstaff reminded him of a long-time favorite puppet: a writer whose torso opens up as a barn-shaped doorway.

"Jessie just said, 'You should just make that puppet 15 feet tall and make the inside a marionette play,'" Sanko said with mock-frustration at his wife's artful pragmatism. "It's a brilliant idea."

Indeed it was. Sanko's 20-minute "Dear Mme.," which premiered at BAM on Oct. 3, thrashed with feeling and flashed with dark, quirky humor. The New York Times wrote that "Dear Mme.'s" figures "are obviously unreal but nevertheless convey a kind of subconscious humanity." This may sound like a lot for a puppet show to accomplish, but Sanko would seem to be the real thing: an artist with both the meticulous vision and unsullied creative drive of an invertebrate tinkerer.

"This was something that I really enjoyed doing, and I didn't want it to be tainted by any kind of business thing or demand to deliver," Sanko explained of his reluctance to put his puppets in show business. "I thought if I had to be responsible for them, to crank them out, I would be a lot less attracted to them. I really wanted to keep it just my own private hobby."

Grindstaff isn't the only colleague who has nagged Sanko to emerge from his workshop.

"I've been encouraging him for years," Elfman said. "Some people take a little prodding to get through the door, but now that the door's open, it won't be closing soon."