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The Costumes Are All Vintage. Very Tiny Vintage.

By SOPHIE DONELSON

YOU can probably tell by looking at me that I like old things," said Erik Sanko, loosely dressed like a 1920's journeyman in coarse cotton overalls, bib-chest shirt and leather work boots. He was sitting in the TriBeCa apartment that he shares with his wife, the artist Jessica Grindstaff, and a considerable collection of Victorian-era taxidermy. More unsettling than the decaying boar corpse, though, were the lifeless bodies of a dozen marionettes, presumably resting before a rehearsal for Mr. Sanko's upcoming show at the Here Arts Center in the South Village.

"The Fortune Teller" is a macabre story about seven men called to a dead millionaire's estate to claim their inheritance as determined by a fortuneteller. It is Mr. Sanko's first feature-length marionette performance, in addition to being an outlet for the composer Danny Elfman to indulge his dark side in between writing songs for the new movie version of "Charlotte's Web."

Mr. Sanko's figures are the grim spawn of Edward Gorey and David Lynch, with papier-mâché faces more grizzled and world-weary than those of most character actors. "Very few puppet theaters take advantage of their creepy factor," Mr. Sanko said. "I'm into how potentially creepy puppets can be. They can say things that people would be uncomfortable saying."

(And do things that people would be uncomfortable doing — like the sex scenes performed by marionettes in "Avenue Q" and "Team America: World Police.")

Onstage, even Mr. Sanko's most menacing character is comical. The same quality that makes marionettes eerie is also what makes them funny: the ease with which they mimic human behavior. This past summer, to the delight of fans, the musician Beck performed alongside a gang of marionette doppelgängers called the Beat Puppets; he recently announced they'll be staying around for the fall tour.

"If we scratch our head, it's not funny; if Peter Sellers scratches his head, it might be funny," said Liam Hurley, one of three professional puppeteers whom Mr. Sanko directs. "But when a puppet does it — and it works — it's hilarious."

Puppets are a new medium for Mr. Sanko, a musician and composer who calls himself "the go-to guy for avant-garde bass playing." His commitments include a long tenure with the Lounge Lizards, regular gigs with John Cale and Yoko Ono, and fronting the band Skeleton Key.

Puppet-making, Mr. Sanko admits, "isn't very punk-rock." It was just a hobby he nursed for more than a decade until Ms. Grindstaff asked him to exhibit alongside her in a Brooklyn gallery.

That show and a string of other gallery exhibitions spurred interest in Mr. Sanko's puppets from "oddball art collectors," as he called them, and the puppet community. In rapid succession came a grant from the Jim Henson Foundation, the invitation from Here, rehearsal space at the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council facilities in TriBeCa, and a cobbled-together crew of professional puppeteers, artists and designers.

When it came to the score, Mr. Sanko drafted a theme song himself, then turned it over with a script to Mr. Elfman. "Danny came over and picked up the puppets, and we started messing around," he said. "Two guys playing dolls and making jokes. We're just different versions of the same goofball."

The way Mr. Sanko makes puppets is unusual, too. One of his radical innovations is a thumb-controlled lever that lets the marionettes walk without the aid of two hands. It immediately won him the respect of the puppeteer crew.

But Mr. Sanko's talent may be best witnessed in the precise aesthetic of "The Fortune Teller," one that is amplified by Ms. Grindstaff and a team of designers and artists with credentials from Anthropologie, Bergdorf Goodman and Cooper Union. The script is set in the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, a reality that seeps into every pore of the performance.

The set is a marionette itself, devised with strings and moving parts controlled by the puppeteers. Inside, a turned-wood table is fashioned with legs made of banister poles. A room for a hunter is fitted with a wingback chair upholstered in fur and bone, pelt carpet, miniature trophy heads and wallpaper that includes muskets in an intricate fleur-de-lis. Like the puppets, the furnishings measure at an exact one-third scale.

The set underscores why "The Fortune Teller" is an anomaly in the sphere of marionette theater, or any theater: a level of intricacy most commonly seen in fine art. The production was carefully art-directed by Mr. Sanko and Ms. Grindstaff, starting with a style handbook with Gorey illustrations and images of vintage eye charts and sepia-toned postcards. And though the puppets' garments are made from worn vintage clothing, Mr. Sanko specified how to age other materials authentically: with tea, dirt and shoe polish, for example.

The most dapper of the characters didn't require too much patina. He wears an outfit donated by Mr. Sanko himself. "The butler is wearing my old tuxedo," Mr. Sanko said. "I'm very keen on recycling."