

# A way of Man

FringeNYC Festival Review

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*A way of Man*, based on Frederik van Eeden's book *De Kleine Johannes*, is a storytelling performance. There is one performer, Caja van der Poel, one chair, minimal lighting, no props and one costume. The stage is about six feet deep and a standard black curtain at CSV's Kabayitos Theater serves as the upstage wall.

The story is about a boy named Jonathan and his quest for a book that he's heard will explain why everything is the way that it is, an explanation of the ultimate truth. He meets insects, animals, elves, and humans along the way, each promising that they (and only they) are able to lead him to what he so ardently seeks. Through these meetings he grows older and discovers the value (and cost) of being human in the society of other humans.

Storytelling, the actual art of storytelling, is all about words, and this production is a fine example of what the art of storytelling can be. But, when a public performance is all about words, the person saying those words had better be plenty skilled: they have to command our attention and, more importantly, get our imagination involved. Thankfully, Caja van der Poel is a talented storyteller.

Playing all of the characters herself, including the omniscient narrator, Ms. Van der Poel is subtle and energetic. She clearly loves the material and loves her job as storyteller. A lesser performer would miss many opportunities that she exploits, highlighting a moment of humor here, expressing wonder and gravitas there. Her director, Michael Driebeek van der Ven, worked closely with her on the material and he is very much a part of the performance doing a candid, nifty introduction and running the lights from alongside the audience, just feet from where Van der Poel performs. His laughter and focus are as much a part of the performance as the white noise of the air conditioner, which he uses simply and wisely towards the end of the show.

But...the success of storytelling depends greatly on the venue and the conceit at work. Is the theater the best venue for a storytellers' art? Or would a café or pub or library more fully serve and support the experience? Full disclosure: I am a minimalist at heart who prizes the theater's unique power to conjure rich experience from the simplest suggestions. And still I ask: are words performed with vocal energy and skill enough by themselves to capture and inspire my imagination? In my car, listening to a podcast, yes. Listening to the radio on a weekend morning, yes. Listening to an intricate and fantastic tale as the member of an audience in a theater...no. Why? Because the theater calls upon me to use my eyes as well as my ears.

When reading a story, unmediated by a performer, my imagination is automatically engaged. But when someone takes those same words and recites them from memory, in public, in a darkened room...a translation is necessary. Not a translation of words, but a translation of experience. It's no longer the same one-on-one relationship that I'm having with the author, there's a performer and a director and a designer or two, and they've got to help tell the story. Out of the entire 75-minute performance there are only a few moments that I can specifically recall, but each one, each, is linked to something that Van der Poel physically did, not just something I heard.

It reminds me of the adage, "I hear, I forget. I see, I remember. I do, I understand." Somehow, it's the doing that I missed out on. I think this actually points out one of the shortcomings of story *telling*: the audience never gets to experience the events described by the words, we're always at least one step removed because storytelling calls upon us to create events in our mind, not to experience the events we witness.

That said, *A way of Man* is a charming story to hear, made even better by the careful and energetic performance of a very skilled storyteller. I'm glad the production is in the festival and I'm very glad I saw/heard it.