



New York Theatre WireSM

Theatre Dance Performance Art Music
Alternative and International Theatre

Two Views of "The Object Lesson"

by [Glenda Frank](#) and [Edward Rubin](#)

BOXES, BOXES, BOXES

"The Object Lesson,"

Written and performed by Geoff Sobelle. Directed by David Neumann. Scenic installation by Steven Dufala.

At New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. NYC. \$65. Jan. 21 - Mar. 19, 2017. Tues. & Wed, 7 PM; Thurs.-Sat., 8 PM; Sat. and Sun. matinee at 2 PM. For tickets and information: call 212-460-5475 or visit the box office or <https://www.nytw.org/show/the-object-lesson>.

by Glenda Frank

Even I, a notorious hoarder, was shocked when I entered what was once the New York Theatre Workshop performance space to find boxes, boxes, boxes everywhere, scattered all around the room and piled high to the ceiling, from which a green kayak and red canoe were suspended. The boxes had labels, some labeled seats, but there was no order. Some words of advice: arrive early so you can explore the boxes and try to sit near the stage-like area in the front or high up.

"The Object Lesson" is a one-man show with audience participation and a very important tape recorder. It won top prize at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in 2014. I have never seen anything quite like it. It grows on you, especially when Geoff Sobelle, creator and performer, moves from one area of cardboard chaos to another and explains his vision through the objects he retrieves from storage. Everything is unexpected. "The Object Lesson" is one of those odd pieces that I think about months, even years later. One of those bizarre, inventive works that creates NYTW enthusiasts, like me.

A tall, balding man enters and begins to rummage through boxes. He pulls out a vintage leather chair, a table, a lamp with fringes on the shade, a landline with a cut cord, a phonograph, all the while chatting to us. (He observes, "There is a fine line between vintage and crap.") Then he makes a call to a woman, which he records. He tells her, "I have a lot of unpacking to do." I am reminded of Beckett's "Krapp's Last Tape." Throughout there will be echoes from literature, popular culture, and music. He tries to play a record; it is a broken record. And we begin the many imaginative jokes, puns and metaphors that are the secret power of the show.

He moves on. He climbs a pile of boxes to the ceiling and removes a microphone. He climbs another pile of boxes in another corner of the room and begins to tell us stories about a woman, his days in France, a picnic – seemingly disconnected events. He empties a box: a letter (misplaced), goat cheese, a bottle of wine, a baguette from long ago. Sobelle hands them to a volunteer to distribute to us, to taste. And they are fresh; the wine is chilled. These are memories. He tells us that the picnickers, deep in the forest, saw a small red light change to yellow, then red, and they wondered at it, "lovely and lonely," an oddity out of context. We hear crickets.

Soon after, he removes a giant traffic light from his days in San Francisco and talks about "the flip side" of experience. He has older audience members from both side of the room slowly read phrases. Are they written down? We don't know. Some are very funny. And time has slower for this New York audience, as it does during a Robert Wilson performance. We move into the experience.

The highlight of the show is the dinner date. He creates a table – as we all scramble to move out of his make-shift theatre space. He finds chairs and invites Jan, an audience member, over for dinner, asks another audience member to hold the chandelier. Then he places lettuce and other salad ingredients on the table and, wearing ice skates, steps up and does an really good chopping dance, probably inspired by Charlie Chaplin. It's a riot. A friend calls, and now we hear Jan recite the taped words that opened the show. He, who was rejected in the opening routine, has become the date. He feeds her and the chandelier holder (inspired perhaps by "Beauty and the Beast") salad and fills her wine glass. Later this wine bottle with pour out sand. We live on both sides of experience! They dance while packing peanuts, like flower petals, rain down on them.

The evening ends with a clever fast forward vision of a life as he begins the day by opening a box for items to brush his teeth, shave, take a message. He ends with a pipe, sweater vest, and glasses. The character lived – and we with him for the 100 minutes – both in and out of the box.

Sobelle, a graduate of Stanford University, trained at the École Jacques Lecoq in Paris. He won an Innovative Theatre Award for "all wear bowlers." He has appeared at BAM Next Wave, HERE, and St. Ann's Warehouse. He is a 2006 PEW Fellow and 2009 Creative Capital grantee, as is David Neumann. Steven Dufala received a 2010 Obie Award for the design of "machines machines machines machines machines machines machines" by Geoff Sobelle.

How people react to the show depended in part on where they sit. I saw about half of the show clearly although I had to stand up several times. Director David Neumann might want to add movable, elevated platforms as they did in "Here Lies Love" at the Public Theatre or employ video camera as NYTW has done on several occasions. Many years ago, when Sobelle was considering this piece, he wanted audiences to explore objects found a huge mound of dirt, transforming us into archeologists of our contemporary world. When LCT3 invited him to install the art, they would not allow dirt in the theatre. That is when he realized he had stored everything in boxes.

The Object Lesson at the New York Theatre Workshop

"The Object Lesson"

Creator and Performer: Geoff Sobelle Director: David Neumann

New York Theatre Workshop

Theater Address: 79 East 4th Street

Phone: 212-460-5475

Website: <http://www.nytw.org>

Running Time: 1 hr 45 minutes, No Intermission

Opened: Wednesday, February 9, 2017 – Closing, Sunday, March 19, 2017



Geoff Sobelle in NYTW's THE OBJECT LESSON, Photo by Joan Marcus.

The New York Theatre Workshop, one of the most audacious theaters in New York City, never fails to astonish its audience in the wide-ranging fare that it chooses to present, the directors and actors that tread its stage, and its stunning production designs. I'm talking about set, lighting, sound, costume, and film. In fact, it can be said that visual and audio surprises – you never know what is going to hit you between your eyes and ears upon entering the theatre – is one of the NYTW'S major calling cards. I am still remembering the unexpected lap pool in Red Speedo, Tal Yarden's smashing video projections and Brian Ronan's super sonic sounds in David Bowie and Edna Walsh's musical Lazarus, and most recently the military barrack's mattresses strewn across a darkened stage in their production of Othello which starred A List actors David Oyelowo and Daniel Craig.

Here, totally reconfiguring the theater, the audience, seated on three sides of the stage in rows of four, was brought into the play almost as participating players. Talking about intimacy, being seated so close to the action we could actually see the actors' sweat, hear them breathing.

Going back even further – I'm name dropping now – was Rick Elice's Peter and the Starcatcher whose highly energetic cast, continually reconfiguring themselves, leaped about the stage in each kinetic scene, one of which included a breathtakingly enthralling shipwreck. Not surprisingly the play moved quickly from NYTW to Broadway where it won 5 Tony Awards. All tolled, The NYTW, in its three-decades of existence, has received a Pulitzer Prize, seventeen Tonys, Obie, Drama Desk, Lucille Lortel Awards, and hundreds of theatrical award nominations.

If I thought I had seen it all, certainly set-wise, The Object Lesson, NYTW's current production – it closes on Sunday, March 19 – set designer Steven Dufala's over-the-top hoarders wet dream of an installation consisting of a small mountain-like range of cartoons proved otherwise. It rivals the overstuffed home of the infamous Collyer Brothers who were found dead side by side under tons of junk in their New York City Harlem mansion in 1947.

The Object Lesson begins, even before its creator and solo performer Geoff Sobelle makes an appearance, upon entering the theatre. Here we are given a sheet of paper instructing us to open and examine the boxes, and there are hundreds of them, that line the walls. Some are actually stacked to the ceiling, while others liberally cover the theatre's entire floor. We are told that it doesn't matter whether you sit, stand, or lie down, as long as you are mindful of the people around you.

Following orders, in the first box that I opened I found a book. In another box there was a doll. In the third box I found a hat with a note asking me to give the hat to another person and tell them that this hat was meant for them. I passed it on to a person close by who in turn

handed it to another. Everybody was doing the same—opening boxes, reading notes, examining the contents, and following the instructions, if any, that they found in the box.

Losing interest in this “game” or more to the point, not wanting to end up sitting on a backless box for 2 hours, as it tuned out in a darkened cavernous space rubbing shoulders with the person next to me, My friend Helene and I quickly worked our way to one of the only two couches available. As luck would have it the couch was on a raised platform which allowed us an unobstructed view of the proceedings. From our perch, the picking and looking scene below resembled the floor of Macy’s during a Christmas sale.

What followed, in the dimly lit theater, in and about a continually moving audience that had to make way for Sobelle as he traversed a sea of countless cartons is an ingenious mixture of autobiographical, object-triggered storytelling reminiscent Garrison Keillor spinning one of his tales, a number of magical feats, and a series of vignettes all performed by Sobelle with an occasional audience member in tow. I loved that every time he opened a new box he found an object and or a letter that set him off on another story.

The actual performance itself starts out with Sobelle sitting in a leather easy chair, surrounded by side tables, lamps, an antique Victrola and a telephone, all of which he pulled out of various cartons in order to create a home-like atmosphere for himself. Seemingly agitated, he is having a strange and almost unintelligible conversation in which the audience is privy to his side only. Later on an unseen audience member, in the case a woman – obviously supplied with a text – making sense out of nonsense cleverly completes this conversation, by reciting her side of the conversation.

In another vignette, again selecting a woman from the audience, Sobelle, wanting to rekindle a past romance that did not work out unearths from the surrounding clutter of cartons, a table, food, utensils, candles, even a chandelier. The scene set, he prepares a meal complete with wine and a salad. Dancing on the top of the table he chops the lettuce with the blades of the ice skates that he is wearing. At this same moment, just as unexpected as his ice skate routine, wine and goat cheese is being passed around from one audience member to the next. A cinematic shower of white Styrofoam bits, standing in for roses, raining down upon the couple ends this charming interlude.

In another scenario Sobelle asks a woman and man, both on opposite ends of the theatre to read out loud all of the objects that they are carrying in their purse and wallet. Their trial was to decide what the most valuable item was and what was the least valuable. I totally forgot what both the man and woman answered. But I do remember having to think twice about all that I was carrying in my pockets. I also thought about my 82 boxes in storage and all of the hundreds of objects that inhabit every shelf, table top, and drawer in my apartment, each one harboring past memories that I have collected over the years. I may go quietly into the night but my objects will be screaming to a new home.

Previews: Tuesday, January 31, 2017

Opening: Wednesday, February 9, 2017

Ending: Sunday, March 19, 2017

Company/Producers: New York Theatre Workshop

Theater Type: Off Broadway

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Phone: 212-460-5475

Website: <http://www.nytw.org>

Running Time: 1 hr 45 minutes, No Intermission

Genre: Performance Art

Creator and Performer: Geoff Sobelle

Director: David Neumann

Creative Producer: Jecca Barry

Dance Choreographer: David Parker/The Bang Group

Technical:

Scenic Installation Design: Steven Dufala: Lighting Design: Christopher Kuhl: Sound Design: Nick Kourtides: Illusion Consultant:

Steve Cuiffo

Cast: Geoff Sobelle



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