

Child's play by Elisabeth Vincentelli



One of my favorite places in New York is the [New Victory Theater](#), located on West 42nd Street, smack in the middle of what has to be the gaudiest block in the entire city. I'm glad to see it included in this Sunday's show, because the New Vic is one of the few institutions to actually regularly fulfill its mission statement's goals: "We seek out sophisticated, thought-provoking, professional productions that are as artistically rich as they are stimulating and entertaining." And yet the New Vic doesn't get enough recognition—for you see, it also is "New York's first and only theater for kids and families." But don't let that fool you: It's introduced more daring shows that many institutions presenting supposedly adult fare.

Fittingly, the New Vic is located in the oldest theater on the 42nd Street strip—a lovingly restored jewel box initially built in 1900 by Oscar Hammerstein, and over the decades the site of everything from hit plays to a Minsky burlesque, then a XXX movie house when Times Square hit exploitation bottom in the 1970s. Since its opening in 1995, the New Victory has radically altered the very way we think of children's entertainment. Through seasons that cover theater, circus, storytelling, multimedia art and dance, it's shown that highly commodified "brands" such as Disney aren't the only option available for parents.



The New Vic's essentially reclaimed kids from decades of saccharine, intellectually offensive offerings, emphatically adopting an aesthetic one might describe as Maurice Sendak–esque, where childhood involves confronting emotions and experiences (theatrical and otherwise) that can be unsettling; unsurprisingly a couple of years ago it presented the poetic, uncompromising *Brundibar*, in which Sendak and Tony Kushner adapted Hans Krása's pocket opera, set in a concentration camp. Another haunting show was Cirque Eloise's *Rain*, which combined a sensibility inherited from vaudeville and silent movies with exquisite physical feats.

This is theater—in the widest sense of the word—that's challenging for all because it does not talk down to anybody. And in our increasingly culturally protectionist times, the New Vic's approach is also refreshingly international: The majority of its productions comes from abroad, thus introducing audiences to a slew of life experiences, not to mention storytelling and staging traditions.

Amusingly, New Vic fans are also well familiar with director Phelim McDermott and designer Julian Crouch, the creative forces behind the Metropolitan Opera's highly expected revival of Philip Glass' 1980 opera *Satyagraha*. Indeed, their deliciously macabre exercise in Grand-Guignol, *Shockheaded Peter*, was presented on 42nd Street way back in 1999.