

Summer Arts in the Park

by Jean Schiffman

In Golden Gate Park, two new arts attractions—a cinematic sound installation in the de Young Museum’s observation tower and We Players’ site-specific, walkabout adaptation of “Julius Caesar”—join two annual summer arts events: the latest “BigPicture” photography exhibit at the California Academy of Sciences and the Botanical Gardens’ 12-day, 12-piano, multi-pianist “Flower Piano.”

Flower Piano at the Botanical Gardens

At a midway point in the Botanical Gardens, you could conceivably hear two different musicians playing simultaneously—perhaps Shubert through your left ear, Ornette Colman through your right, jokes Dean Mermell, one of the two creators of Flower Piano, a free ongoing concert now in its fourth year. But mostly, he says, the 55-acre arboretum is expansive enough for the 12 pianos, each one situated amidst the trees, shrubs and flowers of its own mini-garden, to be heard separately.

Every genre of music imaginable is on offer during Flower Piano, says Mermell. The original emphasis was on classical, but this year’s program features a lot of jazz and “also everything from punk rock to minimalism to songwriters to opera to the great American songbook, plus showtunes and anything else you can think of that can be played on a piano.”

For example, among the dozens of pianists pounding the keys at various times each day in little sylvan spaces with evocative names like South Africa Garden, or Moon Viewing Garden: Sarah Cahill (Terry Riley and Meredith Monk); Antony Ty (beat, gospel, punk and Chopin); Joshua Raoul Brody (“originals, aboriginals, standards and substandards”). Others (including some singers and various instrumentalists) favor Milhaud, “gringo Latin,” “musica Cubana,” torch songs, original compositions, cabaret and much more.

At other times, anybody is welcome to sit down and tinkle the ivories. In fact, Mermell and cofounder Mauro ffortissimo invite the best players from among those anybodies to be in the following summer’s official roster. Kids queue up, too, songbooks in hand, some whose feet can’t reach the pedals, eager for their turn.

The 12 pianos (grands plus a few uprights) are mostly donated. “We’re very picky,” says Mermell. “They’re all really good instruments.” Technicians keep them tuned throughout the 12 days—they’re stored in a warehouse in Half Moon Bay the rest of the year—and they’re protected from nighttime fog by waterproof covers and internal, moisture-absorbing dessicants.

“We break down the barrier between performer and audience,” says Mermell. “We take the piano out of its normal context and it tends to make people listen differently. It kind of short-circuits the brain and lets people appreciate music in new ways.”

July 5-16, 9 am-6 pm
(special ticketed NightGarden Piano July 12, 13 and 14, 8-11 pm)

SFBotanicalGarden.org/(415) 661-1316

“Caesar Maximus” at the Music Concourse

Sometimes We Players founder/artistic director Ava Roy finds an inextricable link between a location and a play. Such was the case for “Caesar Maximus,” an adaptation, by Nick Medina in collaboration with Roy, of Shakespeare’s historical tragedy about the Roman emperor’s assassination, in 44 BCE, by his senators.

We Players is known for its site-specific, al fresco Shakespeare adaptations, in which the audience usually follows the players from scene to scene. In the case of “Caesar”—“about power and politics and money . . . so relevant to our times,” notes Roy—the play was selected before finding the perfect venue, which turned out to be the Music Concourse, with its bandshell framed by two colonnades, and the long pedestrian walkway leading from the stage to three fountains. “It has the architectural vibe I was looking for,” she explains. This “Caesar” is set in the early Gilded Age—late 19th-century America, during Reconstruction—and its five acts are trimmed to three, with 15 performers. The first act is set along the walkway and around the fountains; representing the streets of Rome, the area is mobbed with not only audience members but also circus performers and entertainers. Act II, which includes the assassination and Marc Antony’s famous “Friends, Romans, countrymen” speech, takes place on and around the stage itself. As for the final battle scenes, Roy chose a nearby pedestrian tunnel, with its cracked walls and good acoustics, a perfect stand-in for a hospital tent. “We’ll see the ravages of war from the wounded who enter this tent, or bunker, rather than out on the field,” she explains.

For Roy, though, the most important scene is a small one: a maddened, irrational crowd murders Cinna the Poet, “the truth-teller, committed to truth and beauty,” she says. In *We Players*’ version, the poet is a bard, an opera singer. That tiny but fundamental scene, notes Roy, is about “the destruction of something traditional and beautiful, in the frenzy of the moment.”

As always with *We Players*, the casting is gender-fluid; here, both Caesar and Cassius are portrayed by women, although whether they’ll perform as women or as men is a choice to be made by Roy and the actors together during the rehearsal process.

And as is often the case for *We Players*, the show is performed under slowly dimming natural light, calibrated to end at the magical hour of sunset.

Aug. 16 → Sept. 30

weplayers.org/(415) 547-0189

BigPicture at the California Academy of Sciences

Have you ever looked at a sand tiger shark from underneath, in the water? Tanya Houppermans has, off the coast of North Carolina, and lucky for us, she photographed it. The shark was swimming through a baitball near a sunken World War II freighter whose hulk provides a habitat, explains the caption, for the smaller fish that attract these top predators. Houppermans swam into the dark center of the mass and looked up. The little fish forming the baitball swam apart, giving her a clear view of the gleaming, streamlined underside of a shark a few feet above her; the atmosphere was so peaceful that she calls the photo “Harmony.” It is the grand prize winner in this year’s fifth annual BigPicture Natural World Photography Competition sponsored by the California Academy of Sciences.

“Harmony,” and 47 other enlarged competition winners are on display in the lobby of the Academy. They include, for example, Jordi Benitez’ fried egg jellyfish, photographed in Spain; Donna Burdon’s finalist in the winged life category, “Rhapsody in Pink,” in which a roseate spoonbill in Florida poises as daintily as a prima ballerina; and a particularly comical shot in the aquatic life category, by Eduardo Acevedo, of a wall-eyed, nonplussed-looking glasseye (a type of tropical fish) with a spiky parasite planted firmly between its eyes.

The competition, judged by a panel of nature and conservation experts headed by wildlife photographer Suzi Eszterhas, considered submissions (more than 6,000) from all over the world in seven categories. It is part of the Academy’s ongoing mission to “highlight Earth’s biodiversity”—and encourage viewers to cherish and conserve it.

July 27 → Oct. 21

calacademy.org/(415) 379-8000

The Companions: Sounds for a Lost Screenplay at the de Young Museum

If you can imagine the sensation of listening to a film score while gazing not at a flat screen but at a vibrant live vista below you, you can understand the dramatic potential of “The Companions: Sounds for a Lost Screenplay,” a new (free) audio installation in the Hamon Observation Tower of the de Young Museum. It is the brainchild of local visual artist Anthony Discenza, who pitched it to Skywalker Sound supervising designer Gary Rystrom as the creation of an “invisible movie” based on a partial screenplay called “The Companions,” which Discenza describes as “a quasi-science-fiction-thriller set in early 1980s San Francisco.” It re-imagines other, iconic San Francisco-set films, such as “Vertigo.”

Accordingly, Rystrom, and sound designer Josh Gold, created a multi-channel, surround-sound-type score that moves around, aurally, guiding viewers to gaze, at various points, upon the surrounding scenes of park and city, the sound and view merging sensorially to create a cinematic experience. (You can read some of the screenplay text on site, or simply imagine your own narrative.) A central component of the complex, layered sound piece is a recording of an organist playing compositions at the Legion of Honor.

For Discenza, the project is a way to explore how sound design drives our visual perception in film. “My hope is that for the people in the tower, the view and the sound element fuse into a movie that’s open-ended,” he says.

Through Sept. 4

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