

Dan Hurlin

Disfarmer



Disfarmer

conceived and directed by Dan Hurlin
original music by Dan Moses Schreier
text by Sally Oswald

produced by
MAPP International Productions



Moving, poignant and occasionally hilarious, "Disfarmer" is a wonder. -Variety

By all accounts, Mike Meyer was a curmudgeon. So disgusted by his family and his small Arkansas farming community, he invented a new persona, fabricated his own history and legally changed his name to Disfarmer. There could be no mistake that though he may have walked among his neighbors, he wasn't one of them.

From 1928 to 1959, the Disfarmer Studio in Heber Springs, Arkansas was the only photography studio for miles, and having your picture "made" there on a Saturday night was the thing to do. Farmers from the surrounding county would come to Heber Springs to do their shopping for the week, catch a movie at the Gem Movie theater and then line up for the privilege of being insulted and ordered around by Disfarmer as he worked, sometimes for hours. Then, when everything was set and ready to go, Disfarmer would bark "Don't y'all move and don't y'all blink!" leaving his subjects to stand perfectly still in the brightly lit emptiness.

When Disfarmer's photographs finally came to light in 1974 (twenty years after his death), the world was stunned. The works are straightforward, unsentimental portraits of rural Americans, living in a rough place, in a hard time, but there is tenderness and a sense of longing that haunts the images. How could a man who so openly disdained his fellow citizens, portray them with such compassion? How could a man who so wildly misrepresented himself to the world, represent his neighbors so honestly and tenderly?

Disfarmer is a piece of Puppet Theater that examines these contradictions in the life of an American hermit. Disfarmer is represented by a series of puppets, each an exact reprint of the last, except two inches smaller. During the course of the play, Disfarmer shrinks like the rest of rural America, until he is completely gone, and we are left with the quiet and nervous expectancy of standing perfectly still for a long exposure. Using the direct manipulation style of American puppetry known as "table-top," five puppeteers reveal our shrinking hero in his studio as he categorizes his every possession, barricades himself from the outside world, and compulsively measures constantly expanding distances between things.

Set to an evocative score for violin, banjo, and accordion, and a sound scape of oddly funny music from old Edison Wax disks and haunting Osark Mountain music re-contextualized by Dan Moses Schreier and with text by playwright Sally Oswald, *Disfarmer* is a haunting tale of transience and perseverance.

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During the tour of *Disfarmer*, two films and a visual art exhibit are available to presenters to provide context for the work.

Puppet

Directed by David Soll, featuring Dan Hurlin and the puppets of *Disfarmer*

How can a block of wood be so moving? After a century as children's entertainment, American puppetry has exploded as serious art. But puppeteers still face uninformed critics, lack of funding and marginalization as they struggle to create relevant theater in this ancient form.

DisFarmer: A Portrait of America

Produced by Dennis Mohr, this film discovers an American master in the enigmatic story of Mike Disfarmer. With in-depth interviews with local residents of his home town of Heber Springs, Arkansas; gallery owners and photography experts who introduced his work to the art world; and Dan Hurlin, a contemporary artist making work inspired by Disfarmer's legacy, the film explores the disparate worlds brought together by their shared interest in this misanthropic portrait photographer. For more information, download the synopsis or view the trailer at right.

Exhibition of Disfarmer prints

A selection of prints from the collection of Peter Miller (created from the original glass plates recovered from Disfarmer's studio), who, along with Julia Scully, is credited with introducing Disfarmer to the art world through the publishing of their 1976 book *Disfarmer: The Heber Springs Portraits 1936-1946*.

Upcoming Performances

May 7-8, 2010

MASS MoCA

North Adams, MA

May 14-15, 2010

Institute for Contemporary Art

Boston, MA

Usually, I start with some intriguing scrap from the pages of history – the more obscure or forgotten, the better: the birth of the Dionne Quintuplets; the 1859 unveiling of Frederic Edwin Church’s painting *The Heart of the Andes*; the visit of the Hiroshima Maidens to New York City. I research the subject extensively, looking for a personal connection to the past, a way in to all this history and culture we’ve collectively accumulated so far. I have always been drawn to stories from and about rural America. Perhaps as a means of investigating my relationship to my own history, having grown up in a small town in southern New Hampshire. So my attraction to the life and work of a nearly forgotten, Arkansas portrait photographer is a natural.

Being introduced to Mike Disfarmer’s photographs and learning his enigmatic history, I felt compelled to decode both the images and the man who made them. How did Disfarmer, who was by all accounts the town “Boo Radley,” manage to get his subjects to lower their guard for him so completely? How could this misanthropic outcast live his life resenting the rural isolation of Heber Springs, Arkansas, without ever making an attempt to break away?

While the subjects in Disfarmer’s portraits are (or were) real people with real lives, for contemporary viewers they are ciphers – repositories for our own daydreams and ruminations. “She is her sister,” we might think. “He is about to go off to War,” “They are lovers,” “That marriage is over.” Puppets are also blank slates, inanimate objects whose inner lives are supplied by the insistence of the audience’s imagination. This shared quality is what convinced me that puppetry was the appropriate medium to use in telling the story of Mike Disfarmer and his pictures.

The small town portrait photographer is a dying breed, and the body of Disfarmer’s work documents the vanishing world of rural America with astounding clarity. It has been suggested that, in some ways, Disfarmer was less an artist than a kind of scientist who pinned his subjects to a black backdrop like specimen butterflies. Puppetry is a medium that, while shrinking the subject to less than human size, magnifies their actions. I am putting Disfarmer and his photographs under the same intense scrutiny that he used on his family and neighbors, to understand and perhaps to even empathize with his photographs as deeply personal expressions of their time and place.

- Dan Hurlin



Dan Hurlin



Dan Hurlin's performance work has been seen in New York City at Dance Theater Workshop, P.S. 122, LaMama ETC, Danspace, The Kitchen, Arts at St. Ann's and St. Ann's Warehouse, as well as at alternative presenting spaces throughout the U.S. and internationally. He received a special Village Voice OBIE Award in 1990 for his solo adaptation of Nathanael West's *A Cool Million*, and his suite of puppet pieces, *Everyday Uses for Sight: Nos. 3 & 7* (which premiered during the 2000 Henson International Festival of Puppet Theater) earned him a 2001 New York Dance and Performance award (a.k.a. "BESSIE"). In 1998, Hurlin was nominated for an American Theater Wing Design Award for his set for *The Shoulder*, which was produced at Long Wharf Theater in New Haven, CT. In 1992, his solo *Quintland* earned sculptor Donna Dennis a "BESSIE" Award for visual design.

His other performance works include an adaptation of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, a duet for two men (with Minneapolis based playwright George Sand, 1986), voted one of the best plays of the year by the Boston Phoenix; *Archaeology* (1989), which toured extensively throughout New York and New England; *No(thing so powerful as) Truth* (1995); *Constance and Ferdinand* (with Victoria Marks, 1991); *The Jazz Section* (with Dan Froot, 1989); and his toy theater piece *The Day the Ketchup Turned Blue* (1997) from the short story by John C. Russell. Hurlin's most recent work, *Hiroshima Maiden*, with an OBIE award winning score by Robert Een, premiered at St. Ann's Warehouse in 2004 and was awarded a Citation of Excellence from the Union Internationale de la Marionette.

Hurlin has performed in the works of Ping Chong, Mary Overlie, Janie Geiser, Jeffrey M. Jones, and Otrabanda Company among others, and has directed premieres of work by Lisa Kron, John C. Russell, Migdalia Cruz, Dan Froot and Holly Hughes (including her OBIE award winning *Clit Notes*). In addition to having served as artistic director of Andy's Summer Playhouse, a theatre by and for children in Wilton, NH for fifteen years, he has taught at Bowdoin, Bennington, Barnard and Princeton, and is currently on both the dance and theater faculties at Sarah Lawrence College, from which he holds a B.A. He directed the Puppet Lab at Arts at St. Ann's in Brooklyn for ten years. He formerly served on the Board of Directors for the Jim Henson Foundation and is currently on the Board of Directors for the MacDowell Colony. Hurlin has received individual artist fellowships from the NEA, New Hampshire State Council on the Arts, New England Foundation for the Arts, New York Foundation for the Arts, and Creative Capital Foundation. In 2002, he received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Foundation and in 2004, he was the recipient of the Alpert Award in the Arts for theater.

The Ordinariness of Disfarmer

by David Serlin

Hats and buttons. Gingham dresses and military uniforms. Striped suspenders, starched long-sleeved shirts, and white summer shoes. The photographs taken by American portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer (1884-1959) comprise an impressive archive of images that preserve the details of the lives of several generations of rural Arkansans during the era following the Depression and leading up to the Cold War. More than merely capturing the iconic nature of vintage clothing or period hairstyles, the images impart details about ordinary life that bubble extravagantly beneath the photographic surface.

Lift their beautifully-composed black and white veneers, for example, and you can see wrinkled khaki slacks girdled by ill-fitting military buckles, perky gingham dresses hiding legs covered by scrappy bandages, old buttons popping off overcoats and workman's overalls, shoes too small for the feet of growing adolescents, and hats concealing the handiwork of hot curling irons or bangs still stiff with pomade. The details of ordinary life are sometimes charming, sometimes brutal, sometimes tender, and sometimes even embarrassing, but in their ordinariness they are always dignified.

What does the attention paid to ordinary life tell us about the person responsible for preserving such details—what, indeed, is the relationship between the ordinary life captured by Disfarmer's camera and ordinary life of the person behind the camera? One is confounded by a significant lack of information about Mike Disfarmer, save for a few sketchy biographical details that have been corroborated over time by surviving portrait sitters and former neighbors who remember him and were just as likely afraid of him as they were flummoxed by his enigmatic personality.

Born Mike Meyer in Indiana in 1884, the photographer moved south with his mother to Stuttgart, Arkansas in 1892, finally settling in Heber Springs, Arkansas in 1914. In the late 1920s, he built his own photography studio on Main Street after a tornado destroyed the home that he shared with his mother in 1926. Around this time, he legally changed his name from Mike Meyer to Mike Disfarmer, believing that his given surname was German for "farmer" and that his new surname's prefix would help distinguish him from the biological family that raised him. At some point during the 1940s, Disfarmer wrote a letter to someone he identified as his "foster-nephew," in which he confided about a doll in his possession that contained the bones of the person who was the real Mike Meyer.

According to some accounts, Disfarmer survived during the last year of his life entirely on beer and chocolate ice cream, which he purchased in copious quantities from Haywood's grocery store in town during his daily walk around Main Street. The ritual of purchasing and consuming these goods at Haywood's was accompanied by the daily resetting of the store's barometer, which Disfarmer did compulsively and without fail. In 1959, he was found dead by neighbors in his home studio, face down on a pile of newspapers. After his death, Disfarmer's portrait studio was torn down to make way for a parking lot for a local bank. The entire contents of his photographic studio – cameras, lighting equipment, chemical developers, and approximately six thousand original glass negatives, his technology of choice for decades – were sold off at public auction for the princely sum of five dollars.

The exhibition and publication of Mike Disfarmer's work in the 1970s represented for many contemporary critics and historians nothing less than the recovery of one of the great vernacular artists of twentieth-century portraiture. Disfarmer arguably provides the missing link in a genealogy of American portrait photographers that connects modern stylists such as Matthew Brady, Lewis Hine, Walker Evans, and Dorothea Lange with their postmodern progeny such as Robert Frank, Diane Arbus, Lee Friedlander, and Nan Goldin. Some critics want to position Disfarmer as the ultimate outsider artist, the hermit whose brilliance went unrecognized in his lifetime, the loner whose loneliness is redeemed by history. Perhaps this is because we like our artists to fit into the familiar generic spectacle of Artistic Biography: commercial struggles leavened by artistic triumphs; unrequited romances and frustrated family relations transformed by the magic of unconditional love; tragic personal obscurity relieved by the posthumous public recognition of misunderstood genius. Biographical works, after all, are supposed to illuminate the subject. In the end, however, we don't know any more about Disfarmer now than we did fifty years ago.

Typically, the attention lavished on a long-disappeared world of gingham dresses and hats falls sentimentally into what some identify as nostalgia, the etymology of which translates roughly to homesickness: the desire to return to a place that we seem to recognize as home, even if we never lived there in the first place. But what, exactly, are we nostalgic for in the world of Mike Disfarmer? He was a portrait photographer in a small town in rural Arkansas. He used outdated technology, not for aesthetic or political reasons but for purely functional, practical, even stubborn reasons. He was, for all intents and purposes, a photographic technician. Given these less-than-extraordinary facts, how much can we project onto the life of Disfarmer, let alone the lives of the numerous clients who sat patiently for their portraits and paid twenty-five cents for the privilege? The cumulative attention paid to the ordinary details of life that one sees in Disfarmer's photographs – all of those hats, all of those buttons – suggest that life is not about experiencing dramatic personal epiphanies or seismic social changes. More often than not, life is experienced while sitting at the same desk, developing the same photographs, drinking the same beer.

Dan Hurlin's *Disfarmer* doesn't try to tell us any more about Disfarmer's biography than we already know, and avoids any absolute sense of closure on the story of its eponymous protagonist. This is not meant to be a cynical response on Hurlin's part to Disfarmer's biography. Instead, it is a deliberate recognition of the limits of storytelling and a rebuttal to the naïve belief that such storytelling will save us from the dreariness of our existence. It's neither hopeless nor dreary to believe in the power of ordinariness. Such details, after all, had the power to keep Saint Augustine nourished in his asceticism and Marcel Proust warmed in his curtained bed, just as it kept Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange's hats firmly attached to their heads when everything around them was blowing in the dust. In the end, Hurlin offers us not so much a portrait of Mike Disfarmer as he offers us a finger capriciously stuck in a camera's open aperture.

DAVID SERLIN is an associate professor of communication at the University of California, San Diego, and an editor-at-large for the quarterly journal *Cabinet*. He served as a historical consultant for *Disfarmer* and Dan Hurlin's previous production, *Hiroshima Maiden*, which premiered at St. Ann's in January 2004. Contact him at dserlin@ucsd.edu.

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Recent raves for Dan Hurlin's *Disfarmer*

From the audience...

When I saw Disfarmer at St. Ann's Warehouse last February, I was so moved I wanted to see it again, which is no easy feat when you live in San Francisco. I planned my next trip to NYC to coincide with Disfarmer being done in Connecticut... After the first five minutes of the performance I felt vindicated that the effort to see it a second time was more than worth the effort. I find it to be such a compelling piece of work. - Martin Bournhonesque

From critics....

#1 Best Dance, 2009, Washington Post

This deeply poignant mystery tale featured a cranky and insistently human puppet. In choreographer-turned-puppeteer Hurlin's hands, Arkansas' nearly forgotten portrait photographer Mike Disfarmer became an unforgettable American hero.

The New York Times

Disfarmer was verbally spare, relying heavily on the exact, delicate choreography of puppets and props to evoke the strange inner life of the 20th-century photographer Mike Disfarmer. This intimate portrait also offered a larger meditation on the act of creation, both through its craft and content. The tender devotion of master puppeteers to their puppets is a deeply human endeavor. At its most sublime this relationship acquires a spiritual dimension, and such was the case here.

From funders...

2009 USA Prudential Fellow, Theater Arts

The theater artists chosen for USA Fellowships for 2009 are all master storytellers who explore, through language, movement, puppetry, and music, social and cultural issues and the human condition.



“And while Hurlin’s elegiac *Disfarmer* is full of sound and repressed fury, it too gives an expression of expanding silence”

-*Time Out New York*