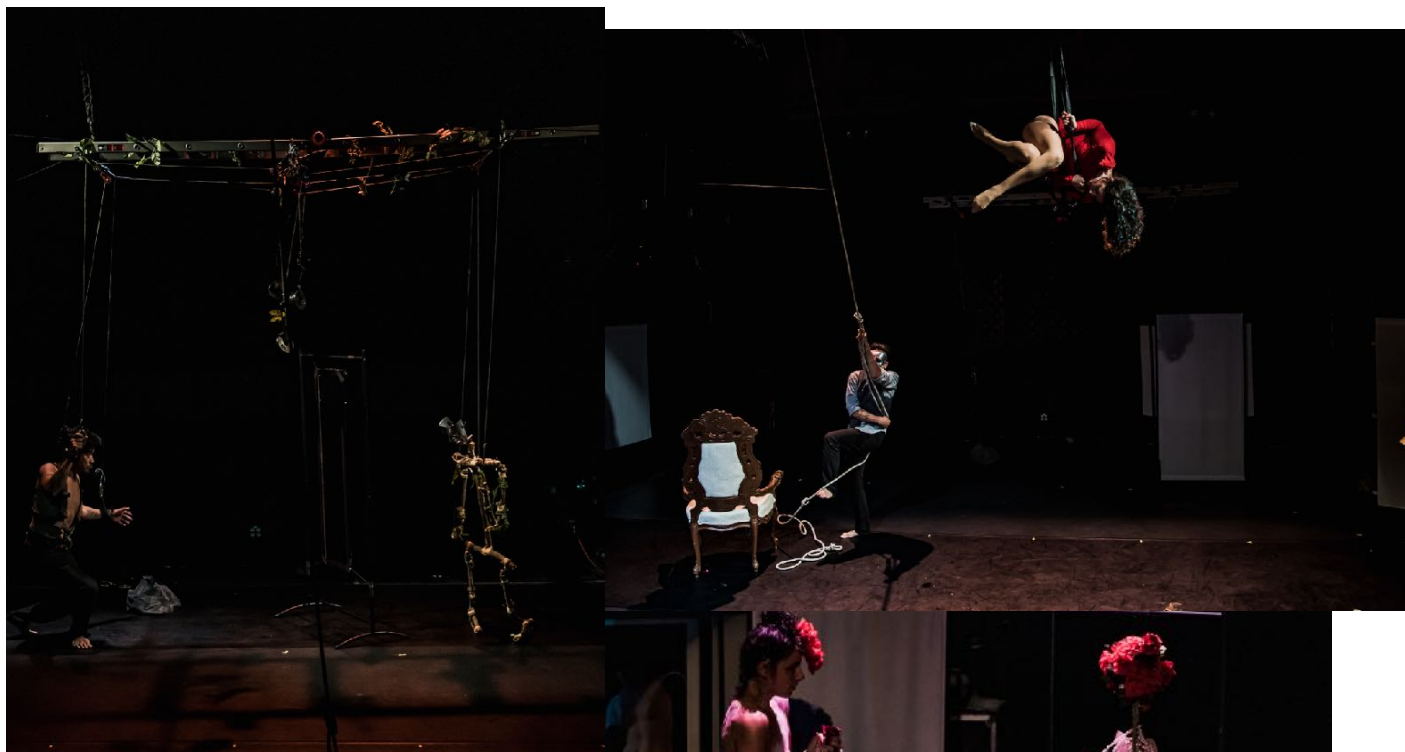


Sticks & Stone

Installation & Performance by Nicki Miller and Benjamin E. Oyzon



Are you your body?

“Sticks & Stone” is a performance project that actualizes many years worth of dreaming from the imaginations of veteran interdisciplinary artists Benjamin E. Oyzon (The Metropolitan Opera, Breaking Surface, Grounded Aerial) and Nicki Miller (Only Child Aerial Theatre, Blunderland, Ripe Time). This soulful and spellbinding work is a love letter from our bodies to all bodies. We combine aerial rigging, puppetry, dance, and martial arts while interrogating social convention through the old proverb of sticks and stones, asking a question those words don’t address:

What do we do when our bodies become strangers to our souls?

According to quantum mechanics there is no such thing as objectivity. We cannot eliminate ourselves from the picture. We are a part of nature, and when we study nature there is no way around the fact that nature is studying itself. Physics has become a branch of psychology, or perhaps the other way around.” - Gary Zukov



Sticks & Stone is a live interdisciplinary duo aerial dance performance. It premiered in New York City at the Performing Garage in August 2022. The show emerged from the imaginations of veteran NYC interdisciplinary artists Benjamin E. Oyzon (The Metropolitan Opera, Breaking Surface, Grounded Aerial) and Nicki Miller (Only Child Aerial Theatre, Blunderland, Ripe Time) during the pandemic lockdown period. The artists are also performers of the show, which poetically follows two characters on parallel journeys to connect to their elemental nature, their souls, and each other. The show interrogates the old proverb of sticks and stones, asking a question those words don't address: What do we do when our bodies become strangers to our souls?

The show emerged during the pandemic — a time of deep personal and collective reckoning around the vulnerability of our bodies — as a balm for the wounds of the grind culture many of us were working in prior to lockdown. The show is a love letter to our bodies, to all of our bodies, and the multitude of stories they hold. The show begins in total darkness, two figures wearing jumpsuits covered in tiny string lights enter the performance space through the audience: human

constellations finding their place in the cosmos of social space. From there, two characters are introduced in parallel narratives through artful tableaux.



Benjamin's character removes a metallic mask covering his entire face. Nicki's character hides behind a portrait of the Venus de Milo statue, offering a pulsing red rose in the palm of her hand. These metaphors unfold as we meet these characters. Each of them goes through a process of "masking": conforming their appearance to the social roles in which they find themselves cast into by their patriarchal, capitalist context at the expense of their bodies and spirits. The story of their relationship, and the unmasking it enables, is shared through the poetry of aerial counterweight dancing, a counterweight-operated stick-man marionette, shadow play, and original text. The run time is approximately 50 minutes with no intermission. The show is to be performed in a "black box" theater with aerial rigging capabilities 5-8 meters height, or square gallery with a danceable floor or studio (approximately 10 meters wide by 8 meters deep) with some theatrical capability and similar rigging capacities (including 4 ballast points for the puppet rig). The rig includes 2 aerial counterweight points and 2 non-human load bearing points upstage for a puppet rig. The audience is seated on risers within the space. More details are outlined in our technical rider.

Production Credits:

First Workshop Performance August 2022 at
The Performing Garage, 33 Wooster St. NYC



Co-created and performed by Nicki Miller & Benjamin E. Oyzon
Stage Manager and Web Designer: Ethan Mast
Show Concept and Composition, Shadow Puppetry, and Pearl Skeleton by Nicki Miller
Aerial Rigging Design, Stick Puppet, and marionette by Benjamin E. Oyzon
Poetry by Benjamin E. Oyzon & Nicki Miller
Lighting Design: David Glista, Nicki Miller, Benjamin E. Oyzon
Tech Rehearsal Assistant: Ayla Weisz
LX/Soundboard Op: Evan Gomez
Poster Design: Connor McMurtrie
Trailer Footage: Paul Hawxhurst
Opening sound collage: Ben Lieberman
Original Music for “Woodenstrawman”: John Oyzon
Other music: Greg Haines, The Cure, Shinya Sugimoto, Solomon Burke, Zoe Keating, Alice Smith
Music/Text editing: Benjamin E. Oyzon

“What I mean by souls is the capacity to create the world anew, which each of us has. How do we talk about that with one another?”
- Grace Lee Boggs

Creation History (Narrative)

Sticks & Stone first began as an aerial duet called *Flesh & Blood* that put aerial rigger and aerial dancer onstage together as characters in the same story. A 3:1 counterweight pulley system became a landscape for an imbalanced and gendered relationship that confronted the parallel between heteronormative power dynamics and the production roles of which we'd made careers: rigging operator whose function is to animate the “pretty dangling girl” in a circus, and “the pretty dangling girl” whose function was to be pretty while dangling. The implications of our inquiry resonated with our first audiences. “This duet feels like it lives in the middle of a bigger show” was something

many people offered us after we premiered that work in November of 2019. We began dreaming about future iterations

and then the pandemic hit.

Scheduled to premiere a new version of *Flesh & Blood* in Eric Schmalenberger's *Blunderland* at House of Yes in March of 2020, the sudden cancellation of the show and subsequent lockdown created a circumstance in which both of us suddenly had nothing but Time. Living on temporary unemployment while at odds with the futures of our respective careers in an increasingly inhospitable city, cracked open the necessary confrontation with the harm our pre-pandemic work/life imbalance did to our bodies and souls. The only way to make that bearable was to turn it into art that might be balm for others confronting similar questions.



The process of making this work included mystical questions of “what is a soul?” which then led to “what is a soulmate?” which then led to scientific conversations around physics, binary stars, and quantum time.

From Grace Lee Boggs to Kabbalah, Albert Einstein to Gary Zukov, our research on the intersection of souls and science got pretty scattered. Amidst all the philosophical inquiry, something keep demanding our attention:

The stories our bodies were holding about the impact that our careers as aerial artists in New York City had had on our senses of self and well-being. We realized our bodies had untold stories to tell, and they needed to be the primary authors of this work, not our intellects. We began to recognize that our lived experience was actually the soil in which to plant the larger questions we were asking. Through a generous space grant from 5th Wall Studio in Brooklyn, NY and a crowd-funding campaign we were able to bring these questions to a creation process and then to the stage at The Performing Garage.

What began as a query into aerial counterweight as metaphor became a necessary context in which our bodies finally let us know how those roles were impacting not just bodies, but also our psyches, relationships, and sense of agency in the world. Sticks & Stone is a show that places those respective journeys within a larger cosmic landscape and reconnects us to who we are when we take our masks off.



Meet the Lead Artists:



NICKI MILLER (she/her) is an interdisciplinary artist known for her work integrating aerial arts as a narrative theatrical language in theatre, dance, and circus. She is co-founding artistic director of Only Child Aerial Theatre (2012-2021). Her work as aerial designer and choreographer has most notably been in Ripe Time's "The World is Round" at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, and recently with New Camerata Opera at Dixon Place. As a performer, Nicki has been on stage with Eric Schmalenberger's Blunderland, ABCirque, LoftOpera, Groupmuse, No Holds Barred, Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, hypha, and Ars Nova's Showgasm,

among others. Residencies include Cirkus Cirkör (Sweden), the 2016/17 New Victory LabWorks Program, the Santa Barbara Floor to Air Festival, Circus Sessions at Toronto's Harbourfront Centre, the Contemporary Circus Arts Festival of Toronto, Circus Warehouse, The Muse Brooklyn, Anver Entertainment, and 5th Wall Studio. Nicki holds an undergraduate degree in Theatre from Syracuse University and is currently an MFA candidate for Theatre at Sarah Lawrence College. Learn more: www.nickimiller.com

BENJAMIN E. OYZON (he/him) is a Civil Engineer with over 20 years experience as an Aerial Rigger, Aerial Acrobat, Dancer, Fire Performer, and Pilates Instructor. Oyzon additionally holds a science degree in Theatre and has been performing both on the ground and in the air in NYC and internationally. Oyzon's performance and rigging work has been in collaboration with numerous projects, theaters & companies of note including Only Child Aerial Theater, Company XIV, New Camerata Opera, hypha, 5th Wall Studio, The Kinesis Project, Anver Entertainment, AIRealistic, Grounded Aerial, 2nd Species, The Metropolitan Opera, ABCirque, The Kimmel Center, JEM Entertainment, EMPIRE Circus, and Gabrielle Roth's 5 Rhythms Dance Theater. He is continually creating different ways to find the beauty in nature and the magic in physics.



Collaboration History (Overview)

Nicki Miller and Benjamin E. Oyzon have collaborated since 2017 exploring poetic narratives of embodied interrelation through aerial rigging design, site-specific installation, interdisciplinary performance, aerial dance, and puppetry.

After working together on Only Child Aerial Theatre's ASYLUM at NYU Skirball Center for the Performing Arts (Circus Now: International Contemporary Circus Arts Exposure), the collaboration has gone on to share presentations throughout New York City including engagements at Socrates Sculpture Park (INSITU Dance Festival), Dixon Place (No Holds Barred), The Deep End (Pale Imitations), and The Performing Garage (Sticks & Stone).



Sticks & Stone Residency & Presentation Timeline

August-November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Began research of aerialist and rigger as co-dancers on 3:1 pulley system • Secured development residency from The Muse Gowanus
November 2019	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Premiered “Flesh & Blood” at Dixon Place, NYC (with No Holds Barred) • Performed “Flesh & Blood” at The Deep End NYC (with Pale Imitations)
January-March 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued developing 3:1 research with residency at 5th Wall Studio, Brooklyn
March-November 2020	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A strange time of world-wide confusion and grief during which our practice began including things like walks in nature, making vision boards, and building life-size puppet versions of our bodies
February-March 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invited into residency at City Point Brooklyn with Änver Entertainment, began adding harness work to the 3:1 rig
March-October 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secured \$5000 funding through NYFA CityCorps for our Open Process collaboration with hypha • presented new 3:1 counterweight research with hypha’s Open Process
January-August 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Granted Sticks & Stone development residency through 5th Wall Studio • Began 1:1 counterweight research • 1:1 counterweight workshop with Nita Little • Development of entire Sticks & Stone show
June 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secured venue (The Performing Garage, NYC) for Sticks & Stone premiere • Began Fiscal Sponsorship with Fractured Atlas • Secured support staff for August show
July 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launched First Performance Crowd-Fundraiser • Became MFTA member • Premiered the “Stick Man” aerial puppet rig at NOoSPHERE Arts with CreateART Performance and Kingsland Wildflower festival
August 2022	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Premiered Sticks & Stone at The Performing Garage, NYC • Closed First Performance-Fundraiser, secured its funding

December 2022- present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • David Glista joined as Production Manager • Began dialogues about development and presentation with Holly Treddenick (Bank Art House, Ontario), Neil Cadger (Living Things Festival, British Columbia)
February- March 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Studio residency at Sarah Lawrence College • Invitation from Adrian Berry about presentation at Jackson's Lane in London • Contacted Crying Out Loud to support possible UK tour • Applied to Reykjavik Arts Festival 2024 • Applied to MICC Montreal (International Contemporary Circus Market)
Spring 2023 and beyond	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seeking producer for future productions • Seeking alternative cast for future productions • Seeking funding and development opportunities to present and adapt Sticks & Stone to new iterations

CONTACT AND FURTHER INFORMATION

sticksandstonshow@gmail.com

sticksandstoneshow.com

Instagram: @sticksandstoneshow

Phone: +1 (929) 487-3442



all production photos by Effy Grey