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## UNCOMMON CORE: UNDEFINED FRACTION

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by JK Clarke

Sunday evening, November 29 saw the conclusion of La Mama Experimental Theatre Club's La Mama Puppet Series with a performance of *Undefined Fraction* by Loco7 Dance Puppet Theatre Company. The performance is a stripped down version of Pedro Calderón de la Barca's subversive 1635 play, *Life is a Dream*, an allegorical tale that explores the mystery of life, the human condition and the conflict between free will and fate. In it, a king is told of the coming betrayal by his infant son. The prince, he is warned, will destroy the country and murder him, the King. In order that he may test fate, he orders his son imprisoned rather than execute him for his as-yet uncommitted crimes. Loco7, under the direction and adaption by Federico Restrepo and Denise Greber, has stripped away almost all of the play's dialog and distilled it into a performance piece of mixed media—dance, movement and puppetry—that tells the story of the King (Restrepo) facilitating his and his son Segismundo's (Chris Rehmann) destiny by barbarically raising the child in a cage. The pre-ordained resentment is ensured when the King treats the boy miserably, despite thinking he's doing a good deed.



As is sometimes the case with experimental theater, an initial lack of familiarity with the source material renders the production somewhat

inaccessible. However, midway through the plot becomes more evident and the company does an admirable job of moving it along. Loco7's puppets are outsized, gargantuan creatures, sometimes incomplete or disembodied, such as the giant, leathery hand that hovers over the band throughout the production, beckoning and pointing, perhaps representing forces beyond the control of the characters before us. Or, they are undersized, like the baby prince, whose wiry foot-and-a-half frame is expertly controlled by three (!) puppeteers who steer him up the walls of his cage, tilting his head to bring emotion to his frighteningly buggy eyes (causing him to resemble a science class model of a human body with the skin stripped off and the eyes left in). As Segisumundo grows, a young woman, Rossaura (beautifully danced by Jessica Krueger) takes note of him and endeavors, with the help of his empathetic jailor (a larger than life puppet with a mop of grey hair and a kindly but confused disposition), to break him out of prison. Naturally enraged despite his otherwise gentle nature, Segisumundo confronts the king. A grand battle takes place and he kills his father and takes the throne. Fate has foretold the future . . . or has the foretelling merely enabled the possible? We are left to ponder.

While the production is well coordinated and engineered, showing a mastery of puppetry and human movement, *Undefined Fraction* lacks the "magic" that one expects from puppet-oriented performances. Here puppet characters played roles in a touching story, but not such that they particularly enhanced their parts. The story would have been just as impactful with movement and dance alone.

*Undefined Fraction*. Performed as part of the La Mama Puppet Series at the Ellen Stewart Theatre (66 East 4th Street, between Second and Third Avenues). Final performance was November 29. [www.LaMaMa.org](http://www.LaMaMa.org) or [www.loco7.org](http://www.loco7.org) for more information.