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 Loc07 Dance Puppet Theatre Company. The performance is a stripped-down version of Pedro Calderón de la Barca’s subversion 1635 play, Life of 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. Loc07, 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. Loc07’s puppets are outsized, gargantuan creatures, sometimes incomparable or disembodied, such as the giant, leathery hand that hovers over the band throughout the production, beckoning and pointing, perhaps representing fury or beyond the control of the characters before us. Or, they’re understood, like the baby prince, whose wry foot and a half turn is expertly controlled by three (!) puppeteers who steer him up the walls of his cage, lifting his head to bring emotion to his lightning-buggy eyes (causing him to resemble a science city model of a human body with the skin stripped off and the eyes left in). As Segismundo grows, a young woman, Rosas (blessfully danced by Jessica Krueger) takes note of him and endeavors, with the help of his empathetic jester (a larger than life puppet with a mop of gray hair and a kindly but confused disposition), to break him out of prison. Peacefully arranged despite his unwise gentle nature, Segismundo 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 foreseeing 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.