



The Press Loves

LOVE'S FOWL

music by Henry Krieger

libretto, direction and performance by Susan J. Vitucci

. . .

"wacky and wise, melodic and mischievous... [LOVE'S FOWL] is simultaneously silly and smart and practically guaranteed to put a smile on the face of all but the most determined grouch."

New York Times

"splendidly funny" ***New Yorker***

"unexpectedly liberating" "**This American Life**" (public radio)

"silliness on a grand scale" ***Time Out New York***

"Love's Fowl" is a stirring, funny hit"

***Boston Globe* Critic's Choice**

"Fowl Play -- Chicken Little stars in a puppet opera"

***Boston Phoenix* Editor's Pick**

***Charleston City Paper* Spoleto Critics' Picks**

***Charleston Magazine* Best Bet**

"Love's Fowl" is a delightful romp

The State (Columbia, SC)

All's Fair with 'Fowl': 'Chicken Little' Update Makes for Tasty Night

The Post and Courier (Charleston, SC)

nor exists on the outer fringes. [LOVE'S FOWL is] genuine, warm, gener unironic, lighthearted, wittily crafted *humor*. O, happy day!

The Oregonian (Portland, OR) **Best in Performance 2003**

"...possibly the show of the year..."

Pittsburgh Post Gazette

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REVIEWS

THEATER REVIEW

Potboiler It's Not, Nor Is It A Turkey

By LAWRENCE VAN GELDER

At the vast cultural banquet that is New York, try to imagine a sorbet course flavored with something exotic, like loco weed. Anyone who can do that will be on the way to appreciating the wacky and wise, melodic and mischievous summertime refreshment being served at the New York Theater Workshop under the title "Love's Fowl."

Before retiring the imagination to a padded retreat, try to visualize this: the tale of Chicken Little, that immemorial prophet of doom, resurrected in the form of yet another sequel to popular fiction (imagine "Gone With the Wind" and "Scarlett"). Now, while planting tongue in cheek and maintaining a firm grip on reason (try two hands), imagine this story of the foolish fowl, this "Recherche du Temps Perdue," told by means of puppets made of wooden clothespins. Well, not so much told as sung, because "Love's Fowl" is an opera. And like so many fine operas, it is sung in Italian, which transforms Chicken Little into La Pulcina Piccola, which is already music to the ears.

But since the story — with mass murder, crime passionel, a sensational trial, tragic love, liaisons dangereuses, show business, shipwreck on the high seas, adventure on the lone prairie and an excursion into the spirit world beyond the grave — is as lurid as the fever dream of a talk show host, clearly this is material for the screen.

But can a single screen hold so rich a helping of the human — make that chicken — comedy? Of course not. On the stage, "Love's Fowl" spills over onto three screens. One carries an English translation of the Italian lyrics. The two others carry the magnified images of the puppets manipulated by Susan J. Vitucci, who wrote the canny and clever libretto and sings to the sprightly music (and occasional voice) of Henry Krieger, composer of "Dreamgirls," "Side



Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Susan J. Vitucci working a puppet in her comedy "Love's Fowl."

LOVE'S FOWL

Libretto and direction by Susan J. Vitucci; music by Henry Krieger; puppets and puppet sets by Ms. Vitucci; movement consultant, Ann Carlson; sets by Scott Pask; lighting by Lap-Chi Chu; sound by Darron L. West; production stage manager, Charles Means. Presented by the New York Theater Workshop, 79 East Fourth Street, East Village

WITH: Susan J. Vitucci and Henry Krieger.

Show" and "The Tap Dance Kid."

As "Love's Fowl" focuses on the post-"sky-is-falling" adventures of the plucky chicken, it takes La Pulcina Piccola from her native (and deadly) barnyard into the large

world. There, pummeled by the drumstick of fate, this yellow puffball has a succession of heartbreaking loves with the likes of Cock Robin and the Chicken of the Sea, and stars in works like "Richard III" while frequently finding herself, as she puts it, "in a fine stew for a chicken."

With its combination of childish figures and supermarket tabloid content filtered through talented and sophisticated theatrical sensibilities, "Love's Fowl," running through July 9, is a cool way to spend a summer evening. It's simultaneously silly and smart and practically guaranteed to put a smile on the face of all but the most determined grouch. And it's barely an hour long.

Price \$3.00

July 6, 1998

THE NEW YORKER

GOINGS ON



THE THEATRE

ABOUT TOWN



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Love's Fowl.—The complete story of Chicken Little's life after the "sky is falling" incident—her fame on-stage, her political career, her loves and losses. Susan J. Vitucci (libretto) and Henry Krieger (music), here performing as Il Teatro Repertorio Delle Mollette (The Clothespin Puppet Theatre), present the evening, appropriately, in a sung-through Italian-opera style, with English supertitles. How they manage to keep straight faces is a mystery, but that they do creates a splendidly funny evening for the audience. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 460-5475. Closes July 11.)

Time Out

New York

The obsessive guide to impulsive entertainment

June 25–July 2, 1998 Issue No. 144 \$1.95



Bird brains: Vitucci and Krieger are *Fowl* players.

Love's Fowl

Libretto by Susan J. Vitucci. Music by Henry Krieger. Performed by Vitucci and Krieger. New York Theatre Workshop (see *Off Broadway*).

Susan J. Vitucci and Henry Krieger's *Love's Fowl* is silliness on a grand scale, but amazingly, it works, delivering an irresistible confection of cute visuals and toe-tapping melodies that will grow on you despite your better judgment. Just give in and let it win you over—you'll be glad you did.

Fowl uses a set of charmingly low-tech puppets to stage the life and times of storybook heroine Chicken Little, dramatizing her bumpy ride on the roller coaster of notoriety. We follow her from

her famous prophecy ("The sky is falling!") and a stint on Broadway to a run for political office and (no joke) an encounter with pirates on the high seas. Through it all, she searches for true love...in Italian, of course.

If *Fowl* sounds a tad precious for your tastes, well, it probably is. But Vitucci and Krieger wisely use the show's absurdity to poke fun at the pretensions of operatic style. There's something about clothespin puppets belting out grandiose Italian lyrics that just cuts the pomposity of the whole opera scene mercilessly down to size. Plus, as the show's momentum builds, it al-

most defies criticism. Either you will laugh or you won't. Most likely, you will.

After all, the jaunty melodies cooked up by Krieger (*Dreamgirls*, *Side Show*) keep *Fowl*'s momentum rolling, and it's a joy to watch the veteran composer tickle the ivories onstage. Also, for writing the lyrics, directing and performing with her beautiful voice, Vitucci deserves a great deal of credit; her wonderful deadpan delivery steals the show. And, coming in at under an hour, the show thankfully doesn't overstay its welcome—its main joke doesn't have time to wear thin. Clothespin-puppet opera may not be for everyone, but as an adorable addition to the downtown scene, *Fowl* rules the roost.—David Nemetz

The Boston Globe

http://www.boston.com/ae/theater_arts/articles/2004/02/15/chicken_little_story_inspires_a_tongue_in_beak_puppet_opera_in_italian/

Chicken Little story inspires a tongue-in-beak puppet opera, in Italian

'Love's Fowl' is a stirring, funny hit

By Devra First, Globe Staff, 2/15/2004

Not every chicken has a fan club. But then, not every chicken is La Pulcina Piccola, known in English as Chicken Little. La Pulcina is the star of an opera, "Love's Fowl," which is a spinoff in Italian of the Chicken Little story. It is presented by a troupe of avian puppets made out of clothespins and styrofoam balls. English supertitles translate the Italian, and the puppets, being only 4 inches high, are projected onto large screens. "Think rock 'n' roll," says show creator Susan J. Vitucci, on the phone from New York.



Susan J. Vitucci and Henry Krieger, creators of "Love's Fowl"

it is a cult hit. The music was written by Henry Krieger, who composed the scores for "Dreamgirls," "Side Show," and "The Tap Dance Kid." The show has been profiled on Public Radio International's "This American Life." It has played all over the country and is beloved by small children, college students, and elderly opera fans alike. There's a website, a newsletter, a soundtrack, a T-shirt, even La Pulcina's "translated" diaries. And, of course, that fan club (Gli Ammiratori della Pulcinina). It all stems from a puppet show Vitucci created in 1984, meant to be a birthday present for her young nephew. "It was funny," she says, "but it didn't really work. My nephew got Legos, and that was the end of the story."

A few years later, required to make a 10-minute presentation in an Italian class she was taking, she thought of the show. She translated it into Italian and performed it in front of her fellow students. "I absolutely killed with it," she says. Somehow, in Italian, it took on new resonance. "I knew this was something special. 'The gods have kissed me!' I said."

Vitucci began to present it around New York; Krieger attended a performance, and he asked if she would consider adding music. The two collaborated, with Vitucci writing the lyrics and Krieger the score. "It has grown from there," she says.

The story begins with the Chicken Little fable we're all familiar with: Hit in the head by an acorn, a chicken thinks the sky is falling and goes on a quest to tell the king. But in "Love's Fowl," when the confusion is cleared up and the chicken returns to her farm, she realizes she can't stay there. She has discovered the wide world.

La Pulcina heads to the big city, where she falls into a doomed relationship with a cockfighter. When that ends, she finds a

career onstage. (Her signature role is Richard III.) From there, she gets involved in politics, goes to sea, travels to Egypt, and so on. Along the way, she finds love and tragedy and sings stirringly about them both.

The combination of broad comedy and deep emotion (a cast of clothespins, writ large on-screen, performs the opening Busby Berkeley number; La Pulcina sings an aching lament after her soul mate, Cock Robin, is killed), of high culture and lowly styrofoam, draws many people to "Love's Fowl."

"It reaches the audience on multiple levels," says Hilary Pfeifer, a sculptor living in Portland, Ore., who is a fan of the show. "Children can follow the story, but adults, too, can appreciate the subtle humor there, especially the fine line they draw between the silly and the serious.

"I think the most endearing part is that [Vitucci] can do so much with such simple craft-store materials. This show just wouldn't work as well if the puppets were fancy and complex. . . . It adds a nice charm that goes along nicely with the story, which is quite charming in and of itself."

Vitucci and pianist David Schaefer perform the show together, singing all the parts. "We play with conventions of cowboy music, Gilbert and Sullivan, we steal wherever we possibly can. Not steal -- we do tributes," says Vitucci, who attended Yale drama school for theater administration.

"Love's Fowl" is part of a long tradition, according to John Bell, a puppeteer and assistant professor of performing arts at Emerson College. "Puppet operas are really old," he says. "Haydn wrote operas for puppets. There's a puppet theater in Salzburg that specializes in puppet operas. Recently, Julie Taymor has directed large-scale puppet operas."

But, with its live performance and homemade quality, this production is also unique. "[Vitucci's] inventing the form as she goes," Bell says. "She didn't study traditional puppet theater for 10 years. She just went in with all her spirit and gusto and said, 'Yeah! I'm gonna do an opera about a chicken!'"

That spirit and gusto animate the show, which, Vitucci says, is a world away from the cynicism often found in theater today.

"There's a very simple joy," she says. "It gives me an opportunity to go to a place inhabited by a very sweet spirit and to communicate in a very florid way. Sometimes it's way over the top, but it works."

And, like all fables, it has its lessons. "This character is intrepid," Vitucci says. "Every setback is an opportunity. Not that she's not sad or upset about the setback, but she goes, 'Boy oh boy, am I upset about this, but what's around the corner?' The lesson is in letting go and enjoying delight."

Fowl play

Chicken Little stars in a puppet opera

BY LIZA WEISSTUCH

When the sky tumbled down on Chicken Little, it actually raised windows of opportunities for the legendary farm bird. Forget the prophecy of doom you've heard so much about. According to puppeteer Susan Vitucci, there's a beyond-the-storybook drama so shocking it may change your mind about the neurotic chick, and Vitucci reveals it all in about an hour — in Italian. And did I mention that Ms. Little and her friends and lovers are portrayed by four-inch opera-singing clothespin puppets? (Not to worry: giant screens broadcast enlarged images of the action and English supertitles.) The play, *La Pulcina Piccola*, or *Love's Fowl*, is on the bill of Puppet Showplace Theatre's Festival of Puppet Musicales, which will play next weekend at Longy School of Music.

What Vitucci's puppets lack in size they make up for in character. The principal chicken, after all, is a diva type who makes her grand entrance on a scallop shell posed as Botticelli's Venus.

Like any great opera, this one has crime, passion, adventure, and suspense. But unlike timeless epics by Wagner and Verdi, this one, Vitucci says, started as a joke when she was working at the 92nd Street Y. While hanging with the stagehands, one of whom "had a thing for chickens," a goofy joke set Vitucci speculating on Chicken Little's fate had she been prima poultry. She dashed off a script and was going to try it as a birthday show for a nephew, but it metamorphosed into a production with music and crew, so her nephew got a Lego set instead. At that time, all the props, puppets, and technical necessities fit inside a 24x4x5-inch cardboard box.

"Even then I knew this was big," Vitucci says, speaking over the phone from her New York home. "There was a certain grandness about this character. Then as soon it was [translated into] Italian, I knew it was bigger than anything it had been. There was something about the heart of the character that is big, that makes me feel good, that makes other people feel good."



La Pulcina Piccola

The translation came about because Vitucci was taking an Italian class, and the final project was to present 10 minutes of anything in Italian. "The story of my life was way too depressing, so I went back to the puppet show. The original took nine people to run. This one I did in the classroom and I killed with it. Then I knew I had something."

That something was a series of silly sight gags that she pecked to perfection in cafés and salons in New York. The ultimate metamorphosis occurred not

long before she took it to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. When Henry Krieger saw her perform at the West Bank Café, the Tony-nominated, Grammy-winning composer of *Dreamgirls* and *Side Show* asked whether she would let him set the show to music. From then on, Vitucci was thinking far out of that cardboard box as Krieger and screens and supertitles got implicated.

If the notion of a nugget-size chicken prima donna belting arias whets your operatic appetite, consider that the festival also offers *Backstage Carmen*, Julie Goell's "mopera" in which she appears as a theater cleaning lady who delivers all the major arias of Bizet's classic while her cleaning supplies fill supporting roles. Or if you have an easily awakened inner child who's whining for entertainment, he/she might be calmed by Liz Joyce's *Song of Sixpence*, which is based on a 1925 musical setting of the classic nursery rhyme that she bought at a yard sale for a not much more than sixpence.

"People constantly tell us that Puppet Showplace productions are some of the most powerful theater they've seen in years — they're so bored with theater they're seeing lately," said PST artistic director Karen Larson. "People really reconnect with how delighted they can be with puppets."

La Pulcina Piccola, or *Love's Fowl* is presented as part of *A Festival of Puppet Musicales* next weekend, February 19 through 21, at Longy School of Music, 27 and 33 Garden Street in Harvard Square. Tickets are \$9 to \$24; call (617) 731-6400.

HOME OFF THE RANGE

Il Teatro Repertorio delle Mollette gives life to the little chicken that could

BY JENNIFER CORLEY

La Pulcina Piccola" sounds so much more exotic than "Chicken Little," doesn't it? *Love's Fowl*, having its Southern premiere at Spoleto, portrays the story of the chicken who, upon having an acorn bonk her on the head, embarks on a mission to tell the king that the sky is falling. However, *Love's Fowl* is not the same tale you're used to hearing. Instead of ending the story with Chicken Little's realization and her happy return to the farm, *Love's Fowl* shows a chick with newfound wanderlust intrepidly taking on the world and all its big sky.

Re-creating an old English fable in Italian makes it exciting. New York writer/director Susan Vitucci, creator of *Love's Fowl*, also thinks that a foreign language puts more distance between the audience and the play, and that's exactly what she wants. "It makes it more able for the audience to be brought into another world, and to want to come into that world."

The idea started germinating when Vitucci worked as a stage manager for the 92nd Street Y in Manhattan. One of the stagehands had a fascination with chickens, and a joke about Chicken Little stuck in Vitucci's head. She decided to make a small puppet theatre for her young nephew, using her mother's old clothespin Christmas ornament collection as a model for her puppets. As she prepared puppets from the Chicken Little story, she realized she was having too much fun with it and decided her nephew would instead receive a set of Legos.

That was in 1984. The play has since undergone several phases of being shelved, reconceived, and dusted off. She first made a video of the short performance with friends. Then in the late 80s, Vitucci was required to make a small presentation in the Italian language class she was taking. She had the idea to perform the little puppet play she'd thought of, and *La Pulcina Piccola* was a hit. She began workshopping the play at small venues and cafes around the city, and garnered a little following. The show then grew in length and went to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Attending a later workshop performance was Grammy Award-winning composer Henry Krieger, who approached her with

the idea of scoring her play. That collaboration led to what audiences will see at Spoleto.

And what is it you will see? You'll see a bevy of four-inch puppets crafted out of styrofoam balls and old-fashioned clothespins. But you'll also see large screens with the action projected onto them a la a rock concert. As the play is performed in Italian, supertitles will also be on the screens. You will see the puppeteers (Vitucci and Ellis Arroyo) and a singing pianist (David Schaefer).

Why puppets? Vitucci has said that aside from the fact that "there's something poetic you can say with puppets," another benefit to performing a puppet play is low production costs. With few people and inexpensive set and tech design, it's definitely budget-conscious, especially compared to other Spoleto productions. And why opera? She cites her favorite childhood cartoon as the Warner Bros. classic "What's Opera, Doc?" "I knew nothing about opera, but knew it was funny. There are moments where you're transported to the heights of opera, but it's still Elmer Fudd singing 'kill da wabbit, kill da wabbit.'" Vitucci seems to strive for that same effect: a

piece of art that can work on different levels and trigger different emotions.

The phenomenon of *La Pulcina Piccola* has swept the country, it seems. A website devoted to the free-spirited chicken (www.pulcina.org) features fan letters, photos, and merchandise — T-shirts, mugs, magnets, and CDs. It even features installments of the heretofore untranslated "secret diaries" of *La Pulcina Piccola*, which relate the little chicken's thoughts, adventures, and romances. Updates keep fans checking the site to see what she's gotten herself into. The spirited play has even moved fans to appear in avian costume at recent performances. "I had never quite anticipated the feather boas and chicken puppets," Vitucci says. "[But] it could be much bigger!" Vitucci feels the heartwarming message and themes of courage, love, and hope will win over many people. She admits that the play might not be for everyone, "but there are people who get it. It's about experiences we all have ... [and] it's written on a large emotional canvas."

That appeal to people's ability to relate is exactly what Vitucci thinks makes the show a winner. "This goes to a place where it's safe to open your heart."

And so, after all this, does she still eat chicken?

"Definitely." **CP**



◀ MUSIC THEATRE ▶

SPOLETO FESTIVAL USA

Love's Fowl
 JUNE 4, 5 AT 10 P.M.
 JUNE 5, 6 AT 4 P.M.
 JUNE 2, 4 AT 6 P.M.
 JUNE 3 AT 2 P.M.
 \$25
 EMMETT ROBINSON
 THEATRE
 84 ST. PHILIP
 STREET
 579-3100



A fable, a chicken, an Italian opera, styrofoam puppets... *Love's Fowl* works on many levels



Top Ten: An explosion of design, a new symphony season, a city mad about art.

For the week of Sept. 10-16

sat-
sun

TBA PERFORMANCE **susan j. vitucci: love's fowl**

Originally conceived for Clothespin Repertory Theatre for Vitucci's nephew, this charming puppet-on-film piece captures its cast of styrofoam and clothes-pinned birds as they sing and search for love. With a score composed by Grammy-winner Henry Krieger (who joins Vitucci in vocals), *Love's Fowl* seems to be the antithesis of grand opera, but is it? See review on page 7 of the TBA guide.

PICA at Lincoln Hall, Portland State University, 1620 SW Park Ave., 248-4335. 7 pm Saturday, 2 and 7 pm Sunday, Sept. 13-14. \$15.

The Sunday Oregonian

ArtsWeek

SEPTEMBER 21, 2003

TBA diary

How much
experimental art
can one guy take?

By **BOB HICKS**
THE OREGONIAN

The marathon begins.

Eight days and 22 events I can squeeze in before I stop, tank up on coffee, and get this puppy ready for the presses.

Eight days of new music, hybrid dance, indie films, edgy theater, bawdy cabarets and a comic opera performed by clothespin puppets.

SUNDAY, SEPT. 14

On this day I make a great discovery: Humor exists on the outer fringes. Genuine, warm, generous, unironic, lighthearted, wittily crafted *humor*. O, happy day!

Susan J. Vitucci's "Love's Fowl," at Lincoln Performance Hall, is a wonder: a puppet show, with dressed-up clothespins projected on big screens, that turns the tale of Chicken Little into an Italian opera, following the plucky heroine's further romantic adventures in a Moll Flanders-like picaresque. *Bravissimo!*

Susan J. Vitucci: *Love's Fowl*

New York writer-artist Susan J. Vitucci's charming operatic adventures of La Pulcina Piccola (Chicken Little) began life as a gift for her nephew's birthday. But as the Clothespin Repertory Theatre piece evolved, and as those who watched Vitucci at work became engaged with her creation, she realized she had something unique on her hands. *Love's Fowl* became a salon sensation, and her nephew received a box of Legos instead.

Using live video to capture the minute action, *Love's Fowl's* tiny cast of styrofoam and clothes-pinned birds sing (in Italian, naturally) of La Pulcina Piccola's search for and discovery of love. With a score composed by Grammy-winner Henry Krieger (who joins Vitucci in vocals), *Love's Fowl* seems to be the antithesis of grand opera, but is it?

"I would entertain the opportunity of the Clothespin Repertory Theatre performing Wagner's Ring Cycle," Vitucci told *WW*. "But the Pulcina Cycle is, I think, equal in its emotional scope."

After a profile on NPR's *This American Life*, Vitucci has garnered a large following of fans, many whom haven't actually seen her perform. "I'm looking forward to meeting the many people who write me from the Northwest," Vitucci admitted. In fact, to honor her first visit here as a performer, Vitucci may very well send her pullet protagonist on an adventure into the wild forests of the Pacific Northwest. (SS)

Lincoln Hall at Portland State University.
7 pm Saturday, 2 and 7 pm Sunday, Sept. 13-14.

