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Fantasque, Bard SummerScape, New York — 'Subtle truths'

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'Fantasque', at Bard SummerScape. Photo: Cory Weaver

In the years he danced for Mark Morris, John Heginbotham could be counted on to keep excess at bay. When, for example, *The Hard Nut*'s glazed, dazed Mrs Stahlbaum succumbs to a flowery fertility fantasy, Heginbotham did not burst into bloom but instead lilted woozily. You felt her pleasure more for his placid restraint. *Fantasque*, with veteran puppetmaker Amy Trompetter, works by a similar principle, flouting protocols of drama for anti-climaxes that let slip subtle truths.

The hour-long SummerScape commission does not tell a story, though it has characters (a baby, a devil, lovers, flowers, mice and foul human machinators) and a theme (the cycle of birth and destruction, globally and locally). In honour of the seven-week festival's Italian focus this year, Rossini (with a side of Respighi) is the show's one constant, if that is the word for the unruly gaggle of piano pieces that George Shevtsov served up with great verve and colour. With the added complication of two distinct species, dancers and puppets, how could the show possibly cohere?

At first, it didn't. Trompetter's huge, gorgeous, loamy body parts (a foot, two wings, a dragon's claw) edged us into dream territory, but the clash between the dancers' precise, highly rhythmic patterns and the puppets' ungainly motion pulled us out again. Soon enough, though, puppets and dance alternated episodes. The puppet scenes were minimal, largely silent, and spiked with pauses so well placed that they prompted gratifying streams of association. The vivid dances featured their own sly indirections but without missing a beat. Between the two, a magical atmosphere arose.

It suffused everything, including the pointedly unremarkable. The puppet baby was not your stereotypical goggle-eyed shrieker but a cloth lump more stomach than head who answered the pokes of her nemesis, a petty devil puppet, with blurry benignity, as infants do. And each resonant love move in Heginbotham's homely duet for gangly Lindsey Jones and compact John Eirich looked like nothing I'd seen before while the feelings it described were piercingly familiar.

