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La MaMa and Yara Arts Group present "The Magic of Light."

An innovative theater piece interweaves puppetry, language, music, poetry, to illustrate the cultural and spiritual awakening of an artist in the 1870s

WHERE AND WHEN:

March 7-16, 2025

The Downstairs at La MaMa, 66 East 4th Street (betw. Bowery & 2nd Ave.)

Presented by La MaMa E.T.C. and Yara Arts Group

Thurs-Sat at 8PM & Sun at 4PM

Tickets: \$30 general admission, \$25 students/seniors, \$10 La MaMa Members. The first ten tickets to every performance are only \$10 each, first come-first served, in advance online only.

Groups of ten or more save 20% with code GROUP10

Buy tickets: www.lamama.org

Running time: 60 min.

Critics are invited on or after March 8, opens March 8.

Photos: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/aHRML98nVhKT8f557>

NEW YORK, February 12 -- From March 7 to 16, **La MaMa and Yara Arts Group** will present Yara's "**The Magic of Light**," an innovative theater piece that interweaves puppetry, languages, music, poetry, to illustrate the cultural and spiritual awakening of an artist in the 1870s. Inspired by the haunting epic songs of Ukrainian blind bards, a young man embarks on a lifelong quest to record, preserve and illuminate Ukrainian traditions against the tremendous pressures of history. Presented in La MaMa's Downstairs Theatre, the production is performed by bandura master **Julian Kytasty** and puppeteer **Tom Lee** with a transforming puppet stage. **Virlana Tkacz** directs.

"**The Magic of Light**" was created by director Virlana Tkacz, performer/designer Tom Lee and master bandura player Julian Kytasty with poetry co-translated by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps. The performance relates the story of the first concert that introduced Ukrainian epic songs and the bandura to an international urban audience in 1875. One hundred fifty years ago this performance featured drawn images projected on a magic lantern while the epic was sung. The beautiful music, ancient texts and poetry (presented both in English and Ukrainian), plus Tom Lee's mesmerizing visuals, propel this story of art that illuminates a lost past, sees the harsh reality of the present and looks towards a brighter future.

The bandura, the national instrument of Ukraine, is string instrument held on the lap of the performer and is related to a harp or lute. Originally, it was the accompanying instrument for epics performed by itinerant blind singers. Ethnographers started collecting these songs in the 19th century, popularizing the texts and eventually the instrument. Yara's "**The Magic of Light**" begins at the concert that featured the epic singer Ostap Versai (1803-1890), often described as the last bard in the Homeric tradition. Julian Kytasty has said that the epic songs of Versai, opened for him the deep tradition of the bandura and the possibility of creating a new music for this instrument. Julian, widely acknowledged as the greatest bandura master today, will perform the songs of Ostap Veresai in our theater piece, as well as his own music.

At the center of "The Magic of Light" is the young artist who draws the images projected at the concert. Porfiry Martynovych (1856-1933) is a promising student at the Imperial Art Academy, with amazing drawing skills, who becomes totally fascinated with these ancient songs and their performers. For the epic concert Martynovych created images for the new media of the time -- magic lantern projectors lit with limelight.

Tom Lee, who brings the young artist to life, is both a performer and a master of many different puppetry traditions, as well as a leading American video projection designer. Tom's recent puppetry piece "Sounding the Resonant Path" was called "mesmerizing" by the New York Times. The reviewer added "There is, at show's end, a clear and lingering consciousness of being minuscule in the universe, and terribly, beautifully human."

In the 1875 concert the epic singer sang of three brothers fleeing captivity. Two had horses and one was on foot. This epic poses the questions of mercy and survival, as well as the importance of staying true in hard times. This song allows us to look at a moment 150 years ago and let it speak to us today. Its vision of the past and future remains steadfast, even if the harsh realities of the present have changed. Then the empire declared a total ban on all performances, books and lectures in Ukrainian, and now Russia seeks to destroy Ukrainian culture through its full-scale invasion.

Yara's show is performed in English and Ukrainian, and is easily understood by all. Its English translations are by Virlana Tkacz and Wanda Phipps, who last year were finalists for the PEN America Poetry Translation Award for their book "How Fire Descends: New and Selected Poetry by Serhiy Zhadan," published by Yale University Press. A poem by Serhiy Zhadan becomes the final song in "The Magic of Light."

"**The Magic of Light**" is directed by **Virlana Tkacz**. Music is composed and performed on bandura by **Julian Kytasty**. Puppetry is by **Tom Lee**. The production is designed by **Tom Lee** and **Andreea Mincic**. Shadow puppet design and video are by **Linda Wingerter**. Puppet design and carving are by **Kevin White**. Lighting design is by **Kat Zhou**.

Bandura master **Julian Kytasty** sings the epics of Veresai, as well as voicing many of the other puppet characters. He is a third-generation bandura player. He is both a keeper of traditions and an innovator who has opened new paths for his instrument. He has worked frequently with Yara Arts Group creating and performing music for theatre. His work on Yara's "1917-2017 Tychyna, Zhadan, and the Dogs" earned him a NY Innovative Theater award for best original score. He continues to teach bandura in North America and Ukraine, to record, to compose and arrange music for bandura, and to engage in collaborative projects.

Tom Lee's work often explores the synthesis of manipulated figures and objects using film techniques and animation. He has worked with Yara at La MaMa and his interest in puppetry was encouraged by Ellen Stewart. Recently, he designed puppetry for Mary Zimmerman's production of "Florencia en el Amazonas" at the Metropolitan Opera, in which he also performed as a puppeteer. (www.tomleeprojects.com)

Virlana Tkacz, the founding director of Yara Arts Group, has created over 40 original theater pieces with the company, most of which had their premieres at La MaMa. Notable among these are "1917-2017: Tychyna, Zhadan, and the Dogs," "Opera GAZ" and "Radio 477!" **Yara Arts Group**, founded in 1990, is a resident company of La MaMa. The group creates original theater pieces in a signature style with multilingual dialogue and music supported by evocative visuals and projections. Because of the diversity of Yara artists, they have privileged access to magnificent texts from overlooked cultures. Yara strives to use the language of experimental theatre to break down interpretive barriers among cultures, histories and languages. (<https://www.yaraartsgroup.net>)

La MaMa Experimental Theatre Club is dedicated to the artist and all aspects of the theater. La MaMa's 63rd Season, The "La MaMa Beyond Season," expands its efforts to develop creative methods and tools for greater access to the arts. Pop up performances and installations will be happening in parks, neighborhood community centers, as well as online. By going beyond La MaMa's physical campus, new audiences and artists from different contexts are welcomed into the creative process. La MaMa has been honored with 30+ Obie Awards, dozens of Drama Desk, Bessie Awards and Villager Awards, the 2018 Regional Theater Tony Award, and most recently a 2023 New York Drama Critics' Circle Special Citation. La MaMa is a creative home to artists and

resident companies from around the world, many of whom have made lasting contributions to the arts, including Blue Man Group, Bette Midler, Ping Chong, Jackie Curtis, Robert De Niro, André De Shields, Adrienne Kennedy, Cole Escola, Bridget Everett, Harvey Fierstein, Diane Lane, Charles Ludlam, Tom Eyen, Spiderwoman Theater, Tadeusz Kantor, Marc Shaiman and Scott Wittman, Meredith Monk, David and Amy Sedaris, Stephanie Hsu, Julie Taymor, Kazuo Ohno, Tom O'Horgan, Andrei Serban, Liz Swados, and Andy Warhol. La MaMa's vision of nurturing new artists and new work from all nations, cultures, races and identities remains as strong today as it was when Ellen Stewart first opened the doors in 1961.

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Photos are available at: <<https://photos.app.goo.gl/aHRML98nVhKT8f557>>. They include photographs of Ostap Veresai and Porfiry Martynovych and paintings and pencil drawings by Martynovych.