

Stage: 'Way of Snow' Employs Masked Actors and Puppetry

By MICHIKO KAKUTANI

The show begins in total blackness, and as the lights come up the audience at the Ark Theater finds itself in a strange, magical world where puppets and masked actors enact a ritual pageant of birth and death and life everlasting. This may sound like a peculiarly abstract notion, but the images — a robed figure scattering a snowstorm of white feathers, a sea-goddess whose fingers miraculously turn into fish and a city in which the subway becomes a kind of celestial railroad — are so strong, so economical that Julie Taymor's "Way of Snow" achieves the resonance of myth with almost child-like simplicity.

Miss Taymor, who also designed the masks, puppets and scenery used in Elizabeth Swados's highly acclaimed work "The Haggadah," is a former member of Peter Schumann's Bread and Puppet Theater, and her work uses similar, ingenious techniques. There are delicate and droll hand puppets that mirror the actions of the actors on stage and there are rhythmic dances set to the haunting sounds of flutes and wooden xylophones. Although several extended sequences that employ shadow puppets seen through a scrim tend to have a somewhat filmic quality, "Way of Snow" succeeds, for the most part, in using dance and mime and puppetry to create a striking spectacle.

There is little spoken dialogue in Miss Taymor's work, and even less character development. The actors all wear masks that are Oriental in feature, somewhat melancholy in demeanor — masks that at once strip them of personal history and emotion and enlarge their symbolic meaning. It becomes apparent that the players, like the puppets, are simply there to serve the text of this three-part parable.

In the first section, an Eskimo boy who has been chosen as a shaman undertakes a sacred quest, only to die in the wilderness. In the second, an Indonesian farmer becomes a casualty of progress, as his ox-cart is overtaken by cars and trucks. In the last, a telephone operator goes insane as she succumbs



One of the puppet figures in the "Way of Snow."

The Cast

WAY OF SNOW, Teatr Loh's puppet-mask trilogy; created by Julie Taymor, with the collaboration of the company; directed by Miss Taymor; puppets and masks designed by Miss Taymor and the company; set designed by Bruce Daniel and Miss Taymor; lighting designed by Mr. Daniel; costumes coordinated by Rachelle Bornstein; music composed by Dan Erkkila and Michael Siroff; musical direction by Mr. Erkkila. Presented by the Ark Theater Company, At 131 Spring Street.

Puppet Players
Peter Baird, John S. Lewandowski, Wes Sanders, Kate Schmitt, Louise Smith and Debra Wise
Dancers Roger Babb and Rachelle Bornstein
Musicians .. Dan Erkkila, Genji Ito and Michael Siroff

to the monotony of her job. And in each case, the spirit of the character escapes, presumably to endure someplace else. Disparate as they may seem, these tableaux are linked by recurrent images and they share a common theme. They are preoccupied with what Miss Taymor calls the "physical and spiritual survival" of man through history.

'Barnum' in Benefit Tomorrow

"Barnum," the hit Broadway show about the famous showman of the same