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# Observer

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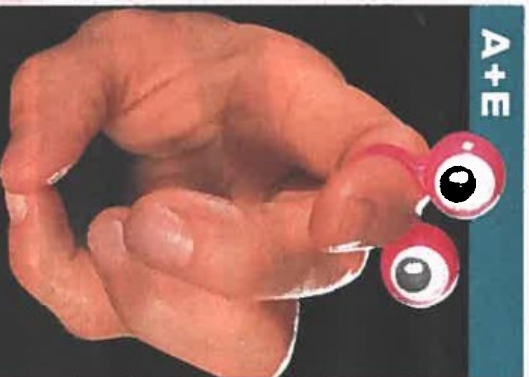
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**MOTHER'S DAY**



Unique challenges of  
being a mom. **PAGE 1B**

**FREE · THURSDAY, MAY 6, 2021**



**A+E**

Performance  
gets a big hand.  
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# 'GRAVITY AND LEVITY'

Eliza Ladd responds to the limitations of the pandemic by thinking inside the box.

**MARTY FUGATE**  
CONTRIBUTOR

**E**liza Ladd is the human equivalent of a perpetual motion machine. Her creative work colors outside the lines of performance arts genres — performer, dancer, writer, music maker, choreographer and director, to name a few. She's also the FSU/Asolo Conservatory for Actor Training's associate professor of movement and dance.

For years, it seemed like nothing could stop this human dynamo. And then the pandemic came, bringing with it a world of social distancing and remote human connection on Zoom.

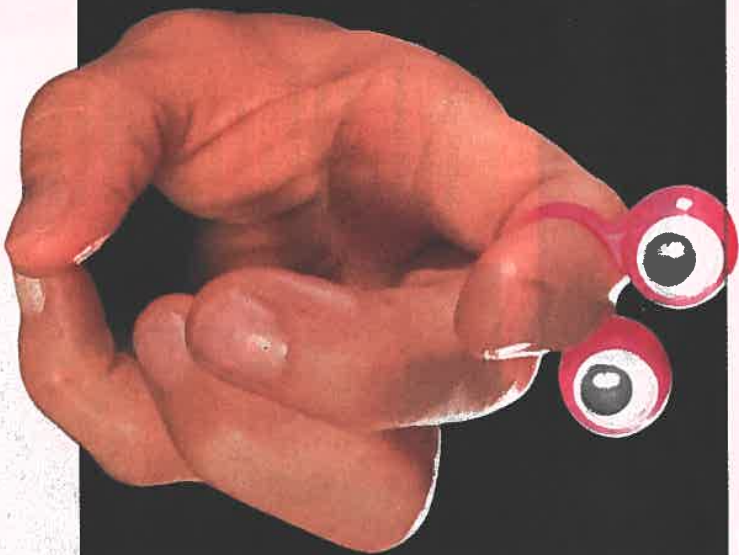
Ladd's response was "Gravity and Levity," a short, spoken-word and performance video. Calling it minimal doesn't do it justice. In this piece, the artist reduces herself to a single hand,



Courtesy photos  
Eliza Ladd (above) and her Hand Puppet (top).

with two googly eyes glued to its fingers — a literal hand puppet. It sounds funny, and at times it is. But the piece can also be heartbreaking. It ranges from slapstick to mime to dance to a cry from the depths of the artist's heart. What was Ladd thinking?

Here's what she told us. "My work as an artist is all about the body. The pandemic



removed my ability to play, perform and practice with others in a shared space. What will become of live theater? Is it doomed to disembodiment? This question was already in the air before the pandemic with the prominence of the computer and technology.

"The tag line to 'Gravity and Levity' is: 'It took 400 million years to go from quadruped to biped and now this?' 'This' refers to what's happened in the pandemic, the removal of the body from common currency or perhaps its reduction to fingers and eyes. Typing and texting, seeing and watching, living your life through the computer screen. Nowadays it's how I teach, make art and find theater. "In pre-pandemic times, I was already aware that my field was slowly becoming a dinosaur

art form. But it's not extinct yet, and people still long for the expressive art of the human body, perhaps even more than ever. The pandemic may have accelerated our evolution (or devolution) toward disembodiment. This raises so many questions for an artist of movement.

"Is it possible to find embodiment and community through the computer and technology? Can we still create relationships, communicate and express ourselves through movement? Can we make meaningful theater on Zoom? Can we still connect?"

"To answer these questions, I created a character with my hand and some googly eyes. She's a kind of a puppet who's just fingers and eyes. And this little one is me, but she's also not me. I shape-shift into that puppet. This character dances,

**TO WATCH**  
**'GRAVITY AND LEVITY'**  
When: Ongoing  
Performance Video: [youtu.be/peenweyLOGg](https://youtu.be/peenweyLOGg)  
Talkback Video: [youtube.com/watch?v=Q28BwtjXZpw](https://youtube.com/watch?v=Q28BwtjXZpw)

sings and speaks poetic text — all in her little black box. This allows me to create physical expression with my fingers and eyes and transmit it through the Zoom sphere.

"And it turns out that the answer to all my questions is yes — on a very deep level.

"This tiny being expresses a great deal about what we've lost and what it means to be alive right now. She's confined to a little black box and pushes back against the boundaries. Despite her limitations, she keeps trying to express herself and communicate. So in a way, I'm thinking inside the box. But I'm also reaching outside the box for some kind of freedom.

"My character expresses playfulness, poetry and defiance. She's a shape-shifter, with a sort of fluidity — and that's a powerful thing. She taps into the vastness of humanity with her transformations. In the end, I think this little one makes a connection with the audience — and that's when I show my face. It's as if to say, 'You're here, I'm here, and we're still together.' "We're alive, and we're dying. It's funny and tragic. Ah, theater!"

*Eliza Ladd's performance and talkback was produced by Sarasota Contemporary Dance.*