

"It Changed This City": Pittsburgh after the PIFOF

**SEPT 27 –
OCT 26, 2013**

Never before seen in the United
States.

November 8, 2013 11:26am by Brandon Getz

Look around. It's not just the leaves turning orange and purple, or the days growing shorter. The city is changed. When we look at our rivers, at our now world-famous skyline, they seem a little homier. Strangers at bus stops and coffee shops aren't strangers—they're neighbors. At the Point, beyond our iconic fountain, we still see the yellow ghost of our 40-foot friend, our month-long mascot, the Big Rubber Duck, the smiling face of the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust's incredibly successful third International Festival of Firsts.

"I would go to the Point and just watch people watching the Duck, watch them take pictures of it and talk about it," says Paul Organisak, Vice President of Programming at the Trust. "One day, I got into a conversation with a guy and he said he was just there because his wife wanted to go, it was their anniversary. 'What's the big deal, it's just a duck,' he said. And we kept talking for a while, and I was thinking, We are talking about 'What is art?' Even Joe Q. Pittsburgh could come down and see the Duck and think about the nature of art."

Nothing—not the Pirates first playoffs in twenty years, not even a Steelers Super Bowl win—has brought Pittsburghers together the way the Rubber Duck did. It was a peaceful thing. And it attracted everyone: every clique and social class, every cultural niche, from nebbly grandmothers to East End hipsters to even dubious husbands dragged to see it on their anniversaries. More than a million people came to see Dutch artist Florentijn Hofman's Rubber Duck Project. It made international news and sparked the pride of Pittsburghers everywhere. The Duck belongs to Pittsburgh, we said. We are the first in the nation to call it ours.

But the Duck, huge as it was, was only part of the Pittsburgh International Festival of Firsts, an incredible collection of American and world premieres of visual and performance art from around the globe. Michèle Anne De Mey and Jaco Van Dormael's performance/film *Kiss & Cry* blew audiences away with its layers of artistry and beauty, building momentum into the festival's second week, in which two shows featuring puppetry—*The Pigeoning* and *It's Dark Outside*—sold out every performance. "There was a reason *Kiss & Cry* was first," Organisak says. "I knew it would be an 'Oh, wow.' You put it early to get people talking. Then they think, 'I should see something else.'"

The Australian-based Perth Theatre Company brought audiences to tears with its lovable protagonist, who faces a surreal Wild West adventure as well as the deterioration of his own memory in *It's Dark Outside*. *The Pigeoning*, from New Yorker Robin Frohardt, was one of two world premieres the PIFOF brought to Pittsburgh. The other, *Measure Back*, by fellow New Yorkers T. Ryder Smith and Christopher McElroen, challenged audiences to look at theater—and the world around them—in a very different light. "When you went in, you were handed a brick," Organisak explains. "You wrote the name of someone you love on the brick. Then you sat on a cinder block....It's [a piece] about hate and war and why we fight. It incorporated text from *The Iliad*," which blended thematically with *The God that Comes*, a bombastic burlesque by Canadian performer Christian Barry. The two shows snapped the Festival of Firsts to a close like the end of a scorpion's tail—with a little venom, a little danger, and a feeling that sticks with you after it gets under your skin.

With the Festival of Firsts, the Pittsburgh Cultural Trust has re-established the Steel City as an international arts destination. "The way we treat artists is phenomenal," says Organisak. "These artists then go on to talk about Pittsburgh around the world." Zimmerman & de Perrot, whose absurd *Hans was Heiri* met with spectacular success here in Pittsburgh, wrote back to Paul after an unflattering New York Times review: "We miss Pittsburgh!" Cities like New York, Chicago,

Los Angeles—their landscapes are blasted around the world as backdrops to movies and TV. But Pittsburgh is an international city of mystery. Australians and Belgians and Austrians don't have a preconceived Hollywood version of our city—and they're pleasantly surprised by the art-loving city that welcomes them.

The Festival of Firsts has changed Pittsburgh. Our city is happier, friendlier, more beautiful. We've immersed ourselves in art, even if only far enough to ask, "What's the big deal? It's just a duck." To change the way we perceive our world: isn't that what art should do?

In the vacuum left in the wake of the Duck and the rest of the festival, Organisak adds, "We need to do this more often." Not just the Cultural Trust—our city needs festivals like this. So get ready: who knows what firsts we might see in 2016.



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