

Electric Dreams

The Old American Can Factory rises over the Gowanus Canal, a brick fortress of art, culture, and light industry amid the dust of nearby demolition sites. In the gathering dusk, flickering tea lights and a trail of signs reading "Rural Electrification" lead visitors to an upper floor where a small alcove set with six chairs captures the last of the failing daylight. This quiet, meditative spot, known unofficially as the Chapel to Nowhere, provides a waiting place for early arrivals.

Just beyond a tremendous metal door lies the Sanctum, a narrow, whitewashed performance hall where beaker-shaped lightbulbs oscillate dimly overhead as if the electric current is as old as the building itself. A heavy wooden table, a clothesline, a rake, and a low box covered in dirt sit at the front of the room, bathed in the warm electric twilight. As we settle, a shadow play of bucolic silhouettes dances across the back wall: country lanes with gnarled oak trees, farmhouses with porch swings and picket fences, old trucks and water pumps, sheets flapping in the breeze—all the work of Lothar Osterburg, a Brooklyn-based artist, teacher, and master of photogravure. The spectral pule of a theremin, played by award-winning musician-composer Elizabeth Brown, mingles with field recordings of birds, wind, crickets, creaking wood, and clanking metal. The soundscape saturates the performance chamber and grainy video images of kerosene lanterns surface on each of the room's support beams until the rustic panorama is complete.

Vocalist-performance artist Stephanie Skaff enters from behind us, carrying a lantern and dragging her bare feet across the polished cement floor with a soft, weary swish. Her soprano murmurs and tonal sighs mingle with the voice of the theremin as she hangs a white sheet across the clothesline, drawing the crowd far, far away from Gowanus. Skaff kneels by the plot of dirt and digs several rows of holes, which fill with warm light



Dishing dirt: Stephanie Skaff plants some eggs

photo: Tasja Keetman

emanating from the box below; she plants chicken eggs in the holes, packing the earth around them as their delicate shells are impregnated by the glow. Wiping her hair from her forehead in a familiar gesture of exhaustion, Skaff heads back to the kitchen table.

"Dear Jane, it's late and my eyes are so tired . . ." she sings, composing a letter to her sister about the strain and privation of working on their parents' remote Southern farm.

Rural Electrification was inspired by the experiences of Elizabeth Brown's Mississippi farmer relatives and historic documents like "Electricity for the Farm," a pamphlet distributed by the Alabama Power Company during the 1930s and '40s. The beautiful, Southern gothic composition evokes the emotional ramifications that electricity had on rural communities and farms, even decades after American cities were illuminated.

Skaff's voice unwinds like a country day - dusky, spacious, and remote - imbued with a sweet melancholy not wholly unlike that of the theremin that Brown plays on a

dais in the corner. Then, quite suddenly, her tone and visage change.

Visibly ignited by the thought of power lines finally reaching her farm, she sings, "I entered a competition to win a refrigerator!" Her eyes widen with something akin to religious rapture as she stretches and intones the word "*Frigidaire . . . Frigidaire . . . Frigidaire . . .*"

At last, spent by a long day of labor and a late-night refrigerator rhapsody, Skaff lays her head on the table and falls asleep. The atmospheric sounds of a country night fill the room, and her dreams of electricity fill the walls: huge blue incandescent lightbulbs with fluttering filaments and a yawning refrigerator with its promise of ease. But when Skaff rises to find a real electric lightbulb burning over the henhouse, it is not the beginning of better days—just longer ones. In the hands of Brown and Skaff, even bright moments spent exploring the newfound joys of vacuum-cleaning bear the haunting cadence of a bad dream from which no one will awake.

Like last year's site-specific performance piece *Nice to Understand You: A Tangent*

in *Seven Parts*, which Skaff created from the life and philosophy of aging machinist, radio builder, and Gowanus neighbor Hugo Picciani, *Rural Electrification* was composed for the (OA) Can Factory's ongoing *Industriance* series, which examines the changing lives and landscapes of industry, a topic close to the hearts of those inhabiting the banks of the Gowanus Canal.

The Gowanus Canal smells stronger in the summer - a little more swampy, a little more skunky, a little more rotten - but to many, including the lovers and organizers of Rooftop Films, it smells like home.

"I love it here," says 25-year-old Adam Davidson, a first-time Rooftop-goer and instant devotee of the Can Factory. "I love the ritual of walking through that courtyard, the procession to the roof."

Long stretches of orange safety tape and discriminately positioned signs guide visitors down a well-lit hallway, past a colossal Linotype machine, through an open freight elevator, and into a large courtyard surrounded by six buildings and 130,000 square feet of industrial workspace. From there, moviegoers wind through another building onto a rooftop that can comfortably accommodate 200 people, a full-size movie screen, a band, picnic blankets, and safety lanes.

Tonight's documentary is part of a movie installment for *Industriance*. *Plagues and Pleasures on the Salton Sea* is the last in a seven-part series that included cinematic glimpses at post-NAFTA Mexico, a biodynamic CSA farm in Chicago, and train-hopping across America.

Once touted as the Riviera of California, the Salton Sea is the result of an engineering debacle that caused the Colorado River to breach a dike in the Imperial Valley, rapidly filling the 35-by-15-mile Salton Sink with mineral-rich water. The desert anomaly became a major resting spot for migratory birds. In the 1950s, resort towns flourished along its banks, until storms, floods, rising salinity, and consequent fish die-offs left the foul-smelling Salton Sea to a population of quirky, resilient, and sometimes desperate characters.

This is a state of affairs that lovers of the Gowanus Canal can understand. "You see, we have our own polluted waterway, with art, industry, community, and kookiness thriving along it," says Rooftop Films artistic director Mark Elijah Rosenberg by way of introduction. "And like the residents of the Salton Sea, we hope that developers recognize the people and communities which have grown up around here." Directed by Chris Metzler and Jeff Springer and narrated by John Waters, *Plagues and Pleasures* is the first documentary to capture the surreal, desolate appeal of the Salton Sea, as well as the eccentric characters who still reside on its shores. It's a heartbreaking, sidesplitting parade of humanity that includes an intractable, desert-withered nudist named Donald; a Hungarian revolutionary named Hunky Daddy; a spangled real estate broker named the Landman; an outsider artist named Leonard Knight; and a politician named Sonny Bono. Almost everyone in the movie mentions the stink of dying fish, but they insist that the Salton Sea is not polluted, just too salty.

By the movie's end, the crowd is in elated, vociferous spirits. Bathed in the ambient glow of the city lights and the humid Gowanus-laced air, people are reluctant to abandon the rooftop, even for the promise of an after-party down the street with director Chris Metzler. Instead, they linger like teens at a drive-in movie.

"This reminds me of a time when going to the movies was an event," says 33-year-old John Hall.

Thirty-seven-year-old Georgia Hutchins says, "I still wouldn't eat the fish."