

# INTERVIEW

with Caitlyn Sullivan (Satori Group) and Kyle Loven

**CS:** So, I thought that we would start by talking about—I think most people in the community know you as a puppeteer or that’s how I hear people refer to you. I’m wondering if you consider yourself a puppeteer and how you define that aspect of your work.

**KL:** I call myself a theater artist [and] puppetry is a big aspect of the work that I make, but it’s not like every idea I have is, “Oh this needs to be a show with tons of puppets.” I actually don’t consider my shows puppet shows. I used to have a chip on my shoulder about the term puppeteer. It has a certain connotation in this country that it doesn’t in other parts of the world and I tried to push away from that title for a while. But its easy for marketing and for people to understand a little bit more about you to say, “He’s a puppeteer.”

I think once people see my work, what I hear a lot of is: “Oh, but you’re a more than a puppeteer,” and then I say, “Oh cool, I didn’t have to explain that, the work speaks for itself.”

**CS:** How did you first get started doing kind of object based theater?

**KL:** What I wonder more about is how I refer to my work, as opposed to, what I call myself. So theater artist is general enough for me but I also have a lot of interest in visual art, clearly—so things like installations, which this piece, *Loss Machine*, has a lot of. There are ideas in my brain that are not live theater productions,—I want to make a stop motion animation film someday—so things like that, but the work—I’ve always called/referred to it as ‘image driven theater’ and lately I’ve been feeling it doesn’t fully encompass the work and the most recent productions and projects that I’ve been working on because this one and then the next piece I’m working on next year are more about non-verbal storytelling. So, sound plays a huge aspect in furthering the narrative, it’s not just to enhance the experience it is actually telling the story. So anyways, I keep trying to figure out what the best definition of the work itself is and that’s more on my brain than it is what I’m referred to as.

**CS:** And you talk about the evolution of your work from, I guess, *my dear Lewis* [was] the fist thing that I saw you do, to the show at WET (Washington Ensemble Theater), *Crandel’s Bag*, and then you did an earlier version of *Loss*

*Machine* there as well, kind of a workshop. . .

**KL:** . . . Works in progress thing last December.

**CS:** Can you talk about that, both the development of your work in Seattle but also the development of this piece--where this piece started?

**KL:** Yeah . . . And to answer your earlier question that I didn’t answer: I started making . . . I did theater in high school, and went to a small private school in Minneapolis called Augsburg so I acted, had a job in the scene shop building sets, got to direct, and do a little bit of everything. Between my junior and senior years I interned with a company called Open Eye Figure Theater in Minneapolis—a little husband and wife lead theater company—and they do the same kind of figure theater, so puppetry, objects, projections, live actors, that whole sort of combination of work, and I really found it to be this exciting synthesis of the theater passions I that I have and the visual art passions I had. I actually chose the college to be an art teacher, is what I was going to be, and then I had a sculpture class that went really wrong freshman year, first semester. . .and then we switched.

**CS:** I think you’d be a great art teacher!

**KL:** So, I found this work, it’s like what I’m supposed to do, it fulfills all aspects of me as an artist. I had been working just with other theater companies on their productions in Minneapolis and moving out to Seattle three and a half years ago was my chance to start making my own art and try to both apply the knowledge I had taken on, as a sort of apprentice—I was with this Open Eye Figure Theater for three and a half, four years—and then just to finally be able to explore those questions and ideas in my own head. *my dear Lewis* was my first piece and it happened to premiere here. There was one short little piece that I did in Minneapolis right before I moved out that’s actually a part of *my dear Lewis*—this video projection shadow sequence thing. Everything has premiered in Seattle, so Seattle feels more of a home for my personal artistic journey thus far.

The process of my work, it seems silly to say, ‘my work is really complicated or takes a long time’—every artist’s work takes a long time, right?

[However, for me,] the nature of needing to construct things, constructing your performers before you can rehearse with them--it’s this sort of complicated series of making mock-ups and then, after you’ve had an initial idea, saying, “Oh wait this isn’t really it.” Or, “I need to go buy something or make something.” “Oh, and now, I had this new idea!” So all is actually

gone--all that that time and energy is, “Ok, goodbye!” It’s not a just prop I ask someone to go find for me so we can use it in rehearsal quick and test it.

It’s a pretty drawn out process, and the nature of grant applications, as you know, where ideas are in your head for so long before they come to a final fruition, and that’s fine with me, that’s exciting—you can have little projects that are ‘make and do’, messy things, just to keep those muscles working. But, it takes a long time to make my work: *Loss Machine* started two plus years ago in my brain as this idea of a city and the inhabitants of that city, in a sort of basic definition, and it kept twisting and it went through all of these really silly ideas like: it’s going to be like . . . Alfred Hitchcock! And then, no, just kidding, it’s going to be. . . whatever, instead.

What I ended up [with] was this interest in small scale--the smallest scale piece I’ve ever made, most of my work is pretty small in scale anyways.

But I wanted to make something really intricate and really detailed with little environments so it wasn’t just about staring at an actor in a black void on stage, there was a fully realized world that we could look into. It happens that this show still has a black void beyond it, but the idea is that [in] this construction on stage—as it reveals itself and though the many layers—every little environment within it is fully realized and detailed.

Then I thought, what sort of city is this? And I thought, oh . . . what about a lost city . . . that’s epic! A lost city, but on a really small scale! That’s really interesting to me: how can we achieve that feeling of a grand experience or environment on something very minuscule or microscopic that we’re looking at. That’s where this, where the final idea started, and then that idea of characters—many characters in a city—became this idea of multiple characters sharing a single emotional journey and how does that work [for] audience members so that no character has a full complete arch, they all take on various aspects of a larger emotional journey to tell that larger narrative. So, we can start to feel comfortable with a character in the first few scenes and suddenly they’re gone and we’re never going see them for the rest of the show. But the next character that picks up and comes in on that next scene is picking up on that emotional journey, in that emotional place where the previous character left off. So we have this sense of fluidity and story through these completely separate characters that do not share a common time or place. [The] context completely changes, but the goal is to give the audience enough of a connection that we don’t feel lost. I’m not interested in a big ‘F you’ to the audience, that’s not interesting to me as an artist; I’m interested in taking care of the audience

but not holding their hand. My work tends to be fairly cryptic, and it asks a lot of an audience member to try to fill in some gaps and [put] some puzzle pieces together. But my hope is that there is enough that is interesting and enough that is there that you are willing to take up the challenge and try to connect the pieces, because if I haven’t given you enough, then [you] don’t care and [I] haven’t invited [you] into the world, [I] haven’t made [you] feel a part of the experience.

And so that’s the interest in, I’d say, in my work in general, but particularly with this piece, because the normal things we think of in a play or a theater piece and how that’s connected to character . . .

**CS:** There are a lot of quotes; there are a lot of air-quotes here for people listening.

**KL:** . . . We don’t have any[thing]to fall back on that we normally rely on or that we’re comfortable with as an audience member. And so how do we get enough to feel like it’s all there, and it’s all connected.

**CS:** I’m super interested in that and one thing I’ve always responded to in your work is the way story or narrative exists in it, that it always has kind of . . . causality of the gut or something. I don’t often walk out of your pieces with a specific linear narrative in mind but they make sense to me emotionally. Talk to me about how you tell stories.

**KL:** I am interested in unconventional and non-linear story telling in general. I used to call my work ‘image driven theater’ because most of the ideas I have start from an image in my head, and then it’s about how does that image translate to action and to movement. Otherwise I’d just make paintings, or something, right? Or I’d make sculptures. I would say though that if I were to look at a show when it’s all done I would have a series of bullet points or ‘X’s along the way that are stronger visuals for me that maybe it started with. The interesting thing about *Loss Machine* is that it is the larger structure itself that [was the] image in my head to begin with, it wasn’t these miniature worlds within it—that has come along the way in the last year and a half.

I guess it varies: sometimes it’s words, sometimes it’s visual, sometimes it’s the idea of idioms. I realized in this production, that if I look back on my work, [it] has been a constant but I didn’t realize it until this project, how much the visualization of idioms is a part of my work—taking an idiom and realizing that on stage. And these references that make complete sense in my head,

I realize it it's a balancing act in deciding what is important that an audience needs to understand and what am I ok that not everybody gets. I trust that somewhere along the way someone is going to get it and really appreciate that.

I've had that happen enough, [for example:] *my dear Lewis*, I've performed in different cities and internationally a few times and there's some moment that somebody latched onto in Amsterdam, that everyone had always said, "I don't really get that, what does that mean?"

It's like: "Well it's this for me." Finally, someone got it and I didn't really have to explain. But again it was a minor aspect, one little image; one little wink, or one smirk moment that might happen. I guess there's something about the work that I make and the interest I have as an audience member in the gratifying experience of discovering something that wasn't dropped on my head . . . so my work has a lot of those things on varying levels: a tiny little moment or a gesture, or a phrase, or a sound. Sometimes it's those things on their own and sometimes it's how they are complimented or contrasted against another one of those elements that's taking place at the same time on stage.

**CS:** So when I first met you, probably right after you moved to the city, or pretty soon after you moved to the city, right? You were involved in *Winky*—Kyle was involved in this piece that my company The Satori group was making, *Winky*, doing some consultation—and I remember during our first meeting, you [said], "Here's the thing: I'm not really a collaborative artist, I've been doing my own thing, I've been doing solo pieces, I don't know what it's going to be like to work with an ensemble." I found you a joy to work with. But, I'm also noticing this piece has a lot more people involved in it; all the sudden you have brought in a lot of collaborators. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about how bringing more collaborators into your work has affected the piece.

**KL:** Which is super exciting to me. I think a lot of why I said that two years ago, three years ago, [was because] I moved out here and I had never visited this state before, I didn't know a single person, I didn't have a job . . . anything, and so *my dear Lewis*, when I made that piece, it literally was me, sitting in my apartment, going, "Ok, this, and then this." And I would run past ideas every once in a while with a friend back in Minneapolis and they would [say], "Well I don't know, that sounds cool but I can't see it." And the composer made all of the music; we correspond only through e-mail and

through text. I would be like, "Ok, great, can you change this at this moment and it needs to have this feel and be about two minutes long." And that's how all the music for *my dear Lewis* was made.

I think early on, moving here, there was a sense of trust that really needs to take place and that takes a lot of time to develop. So, for me, moving here and not having a connection to the arts community early on, it was like, ok, I'm going to make one man shows, because that's easier in some aspects—it presents a whole lot of other challenges as well—but I was working with this one man show format, and trying to then tour my work. Because it's easier to say, "Hey there is only one of me." Instead of, "Hey you need to bring 15 of us, but it's going to be great, but you don't know me!"

It's been really exciting to work with multiple collaborators on this piece. There's Jessica Hatlo, she is directing the piece. She began working on the project last year with me as well. She has really strong dramaturgical skills, which I'm really interested in that second perspective in the work, especially for something that is a series of disconnected events trying to have a connection—an emotional connection—so she's been really incredible in that regard, as well as others.

Kevin Heard also began on the project last year as sound designer, he's a real pleasure to work with and I told Kevin the other day, that we should start a sound effects studio because I could sit in a room all day long, and make weird noises into a microphone or break celery or something--be a modern day Foley artist. That would be awesome. Yeah, sound's huge to me. Paurl Walsh is composing. He's worked with Implied Violence, Degenerate Art Ensemble, and he has a back ground in classical composition but with an electronic emphasis, and separate interests, and because loss machine is the idea of a machine and how that functions bringing in, musically, sound that is still strongly connected to electronic noises, to sampling sound affects that appear in other parts of the show, so that it's a really smooth transition between music and sound effect, it's all sort of the same thing.

Amiya Brown is doing lighting. And there are lots of internal lights she's working on. The set, as it reveals itself, has lots of built in light that I'm controlling to help bring emphasis and try to make this city/machine live.

**CS:** And are they doing the construction of the machine with you?

**KL:** I've been working on this the set and then Amiya will be coming in an adding in the various lighting effects. But it's been a constant conversation of, "Ok, do you need space here for that idea? Ok, I can allot you that."

Or, “Ok, then let me move this section over, or I will rebuild this other area,” so that it meets the needs that we’ve decided on. And then Lauren Hester of The Satori Group is stage managing. It’s the first time that I’ve had a stage manager, which is an incredible thing, it’s is amazing, it’s amazing.

**CS:** I’ll ask you: what is your favorite thing about the show right now?

**KL:** The complexity of the show is both the most exciting and the most challenging thing. This piece has so many layers in all aspects of the production and it’s been a really exciting challenge to try to bring those layers together so that it tells the story that we’re trying to tell.