Zest

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PERFORMANCE ART

‘Slyk’ takes its show to the streets of Houston

By Molly Glentzer

Their conversation goes something like this:
“But.”
“Done.”
“Look.”
“She’s.”
“What.”
“She’s.”
“Done.”
“But.”

It’s no wonder some people have avoided them at Shipley’s Donuts in Midtown. They’re an odd couple: a slightly delusional older woman whom you could imagine as an aging actress from the ’50s or ’60s and a young man who is her traveling companion.

They’ve also become happy-hour regulars at Double Trouble, and in the middle of the afternoon, she puts on a little show in an empty lot, certain a Broadway producer named Jimmy will show up. Of course, he doesn’t.

They walk everywhere from DiverseWorks, where stranger things have happened — but not too much stranger.

“Slyk Chaynjis” continues on H4

Tek Wilson, left, plays Slyk and Caleb Fields is Sancho in “Slyk Chaynjis,” a work commissioned by DiverseWorks.
"Slyk Chayninis"
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Inside DiverseWorks' gallery, a more passive character, Calvero, joins them. He's a life-size puppet who lies on the floor under an installation of hanging fluorescent lights.

Slyk Chayninis, the woman, and Sancho, her sidekick, are not exactly for real, either.

They're the characters of Heather and Ivan Morison's "Slyk Chayninis," a performance artwork that's a little bit "Don Quixote," a smidge "Waiting for Godot" and a tad Charlie Chaplin film on a loop.

Houston actors Tek Wilson (Slyk) and Caleb Fields (Sancho) enact the enigmatic narrative six hours a day, four days a week, regardless of whether anyone is watching. Their actions are only loosely scripted, an exercise of improvisational endurance requiring them to react to whatever people or circumstances cross their paths.

Their vague story involves an epic journey into self-discovery, and their relationship has a complicated history. If you listen for an hour or so, especially to Sancho, you may get some of the gist:

Sancho, when he was in college, fathered a child with Slyk's daughter. Slyk's husband paid him to go away, and the daughter ran off with her child. Slyk, whose "real" name is Eleanor Lancaster, has been killed. She's come unglued and adopted a new identity. Sancho feels obligated to follow and help her.

"In a sense, it's a game of raising stakes; reinventing their pasts and their stories, and they have to use the visitors moving between them to see what the other person is saying," Ivan Morison said.

He doesn't expect audiences to watch for six hours. "They'll see a bit of it. Essentially they get to experience these two characters."

The day unfolds in six sections of about an hour apiece, moving in and out of the gallery at DiverseWorks (described in the program as "A Dark and Silent Room") through the neighborhood.

The word game at the doughnut shop (like musical rounds, adding up to phrases like "but look what she's done" or "I used to love her") is the "switch" that signals the end of the morning's comedy and a rising tide of conflict.

"One of them wins, and one has to give in," Morison said.

"Slyk Chayninis" is a departure from the more object-focused art for which the Morisons are known, although they often build their projects around a narrative and puppets are a signature element.

They just finished a three-month tour of their "Mr. Clever's Puppet Show" for the National Theatre of Wales. They also create fantastical outdoor environments (recent sculpture was a hut made of polished coal) and sculptures designed to be flown like kites.

Last year's "Anna" at Heswtho Wakefield gallery in West Yorkshire, England, which included a number of sculptural objects and puppetry, was inspired by the writing of 20th-century British novelist Anna Kavan.

The Morisons like to lead viewers into the "sip and slide between the interior realm of art and the pedestrian world of everyday life," notes DiverseWorks director Elizabeth Dunbar in the "Slyk Chayninis" program.

While the Houston set doesn't look complicated, the Morisons were particular about every detail of the installation, including the walls' color, the placement of every element, the type of lighting and human trajectories. (This is their first institutional commission in the U.S.)

"Heavy character development like this is sort of a new direction. The piece for the National Theatre of Wales, its focus was on the play," Morison said.

Ivan Morison said, "This is almost taking away the play, and it's just the characters."

The Morisons created the archetypes of Slyk and Sancho after traveling across Texas for a research trip that started in El Paso. They were thinking about the idea of crossing borders and wanted to develop some kind of proxy for themselves as artists, he said.

They imagined a slightly androgynous female character who might have a sidekick. "They'd have movements, sort of routines, based on silent movies. Then we didn't do anything more until we had our actors. We wanted to leave it open and see what came out," he explained.

In auditions, Wilson and Fields clicked. Then came rounds of "hot seating" interviews with the actors to build the details.

"We wrote out a narrative for both of them, then broke them down; there's like an algorithm for them to go through. They sort of get to a point, and then they leave. Then they come back and pick up from that point, and leave, come back that point," Morison said.

The actors also gave themselves some rules: Sancho is only briefly allowed inside the DiverseWorks gallery, even when it's raining; and when they head out somewhere together, they never start in the right direction.

"They have a long run, so we built in lots of possibilities, lots of games they play," Morison said. "They have a narrative to build around but they never quite know what's happening with one another."

Their walking routine is funny; they sometimes keep their distances from each other but stop and
start in synchronization. “It’s strange how that jumps out at you,” Morison said.

During rehearsals, the police thought it was strange, too, and questioned them.

Morison went back to Great Britain after the opening on Nov. 2 but returned in late November to film video that will be added to the piece and introduce another character, a young girl.

“We’re not really changing anything; just playing some of these games for the recording so we see what else we can get from them, maybe expand them a little bit,” Morison said.

Wilson, a veteran actress who has worked at Stages, Catastrophic Theatre, Infernal Bridegroom Productions and Main Street Theater, says the work presents a different challenge than what she’s used to. “You just get really engaged with your partner because that’s all you really have,” she said.

Fields, a graduate of Houston’s High School for the Performing and Visual Arts who recently returned from Boston University, admits he gets bored sometimes. He has to spend hours pacing outside the DiverseWorks door.

“It’s sort of like reverse voyeurism, sitting in here and watching somebody outside. He’s out there so much and has a lot of movement that takes him back and forth across the window. It can get really hypnotic,” Wilson said.

Minuita gets her attention now, too — down to every little scrap on the sidewalks they traverse every day.

The opening, which included an arrival scene with a live donkey, brought the biggest audience to date. Although a few visitors have followed them for a segment or two of the day, many afternoons, Wilson and Fields have the gallery to themselves.

“I’m always interested in things that are a little bit risky. Ivan has been very generous about how much he’s willing to collaborate,” Wilson said.

“It’s going to be fascinating at the end of it to think back to what opening night was like — and how many unknowns there were for us — and see where it lands.”

“This is like nothing I’ve done before,” Fields said. “This is a testament for me and everybody to take a leap of faith into something you’re not comfortable in and try it.”

Audience reactions have run the gamut: some people interact with Slyk and Sancho aggressively, Wilson said, while some are reticent.

“People who come into the gallery are trying to work out the rules or find the edges. They might ask questions, try to find things out — which is part of the point,” Morison said. “And they’ll move things around. That’s interesting, to see people try to fathom it.”

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