

Slambovia and Caravan of Thieves take over Bellows Falls



By Clara Rose Thornton
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Grace Potter doesn't care for musicians who climb onstage in lackluster humdrum and play their show without much to say between songs.

She told me once, "The entire show is important, not just the music. That's what I think makes a great band — one that's not only talented musically and can sound great on a record but who is also compelling visually and can tell a story and create a character within that whole realm."

That interview from this past summer, and its recent thematic manifestation, caused me to think about what, if anything, was lost in the evolution of music's relationship to theatricality. It's true that in the 1920s, campy vaudevillian aesthetics leaked into both theater and concerts, upping the ante. Before that time, with no films and fledgling radio, an understimulated populace (by today's standards of media onslaught) considered live performance both the pinnacle and gristle of entertainment, and the culture of musicianship complied. What we have today as the norm — lying even beyond the shadow of the glamorous chanteuses of the '40s through the '80s — indeed seems a digitized, callous and dispassionate parade.

This weekend, southern Vermont will be fortunate to receive two acts who carry on the torch of wild showmanship, theatrical tomfoolery and grandiose musical gesture: Gandalf Murphy and the Slambovian Circus of Dreams and Caravan of Thieves, playing the Bellows Falls Opera House Saturday and Thursday, respectively, both at 8 p.m. These popular Northeast bands have become known across the country and world for their creation of character elements onstage and immersing audiences into a veritable visual/audio/sensory theater, musical chops not lacking.

Thursday's performers, Caravan of Thieves, formed in 2004 and hail from Bridgeport, Conn. They're an alt-gypsy-jazz four-piece. The sound is lilting, upbeat, intricate and string-heavy, in the tradition of the best gypsy

swing from the turn of the 20th century. What sets the band apart from its forebears, though, is the aspect of post-modern, macabre styling in the live show. Husband and wife acoustic guitar duo Fuzz and Carrie Sangiovanni, violinist Ben Dean and double bassist Brian Anderson dress like cemetery groundskeepers angry at their own gothic elegance. They even pose for photo shoots in cemeteries, with black corsets, lace and top hats galore.

More than fashion flair, the four players jump and scream, chase after each other and sit around on boxes facing one another in intimate jams, creating an atmosphere of deep camaraderie, playfulness and artful discernment. As those in their growing fan base can tell you, a Caravan of Thieves concert is more than sounds and voices, yet those alone may slay you.

The renovated Bellows Falls Opera House and its historic atmosphere offer a perfect setting for this coming weekend of concerts. Take a step back in time to genuine showmanship, and the present moment may sparkle a bit brighter in turn.