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Sand Stories: Performances Flow Through Your Fingers

Yelena Kadyrova tells tales through sand pictures

By Yulia Skopich

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Sand images last for only a moment. **Courtesy of Yelena Kadyrova**

Sand master Yelena Kadyrova touches sand on the table, and on a big screen, spectators see waves, a ship, and the Little Mermaid swimming on the waves. Each scene stays on the screen for no more than a couple of seconds. Actors, musicians, and a storyteller help to give life to the story unfolding and make it easy for the audience to immerse themselves in the tale.

Yelena Kadyrova's first sand performance was in 2010. "My technique was weak, but I had a lot of desire and inspiration," she told The Moscow Times.

Before that, she used different techniques and tried to work with loose tea, coffee, grits, and even dust from the road. But sand turned out to be the best material.

“It has so much energy! It’s like “now that we've met, we can never be parted,” Kadyrova said. “Sand is changeable, like life itself. A moment in time is never repeated, and the drawings in sand perfectly show this changeability and the importance of the moment. It is wonderful when the entire audience, all at the same time, is sorry to see the picture disappear and waits for its rebirth into a new one.”

Birth of masterpieces

Yelena Kadyrova often performs at the invitation of Vitaly Averianov, director of the art project Beau Monde. For these performances, there is already a screenplay and music, and she only works with sand. But sometimes she creates the play herself. She writes the screenplay, discusses scenes with invited artists, and discusses music with musicians. Then rehearsals begin.

Sand preparation takes a special place in the process. “Sand isn’t all the same. It's like brushes: there are cheap ones with artificial bristles sticking out in all directions, and there are expensive ones with a good natural bristles that come in different textures and sizes. To create a beautiful performance, sand has to be fine, uniform, and heavy. I import it from all over the world. I even order from the Sahara! The delivery is more expensive than the sand,” Yelena Kadyrova says.

Once the sand is selected, it must be washed, sieved, and burned. Only then is it ready for work.

Performances for children are usually about 40 minutes to an hour. Private shows dedicated to a wedding or a birthday are about seven to fifteen minutes.

Performances

Before the performance, the equipment is checked, and only when everything is ready and the audience has gathered in the hall does the magic begin.

The sand performances are held at the city’s most prestigious halls: the Nutcracker Municipal Ballet Theater, with the B-A-C-H chamber orchestra at the Yekaterinburg Music House, with the Ural State Russian Orchestra, with pianist Vladislav Chepinoga at the Sverdlovsk Philharmonic Concert Hall, and at other city cultural venues.

One of the most popular productions in Kadyrova’s extensive and ever-growing repertory is “Aladdin's Magic Lamp.” Yelena Kadyrova; Pavel Vasiliev, the conductor of the Ural State Russian Orchestra; and soloist Alexei Petrov all won the Sverdlovsk region Governor's prize in 2020 for this production.

The most emotional production, however, is “The Amazing Journey of Edward the Rabbit.” Usually the entire audience and even performers weep.

Every sand play can be watched many times, since sand never falls the same way, and each time the story is drawn differently.

“We have many good productions, and we’ll continue to perform them,” Kadyrova said, “but, of course, I still have many ideas and stories that I want to draw.”

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