

How the Watermill Refreshed Its 22-Year-Old Benefit

By JIM SHI | August 06, 2015

NEW YORK On July 25, Mother Nature offered a temporary respite from the month's oppressive heat in time for the Watermill Center's benefit, one of the East End's top social events of the summer. Now in its 22nd year, the always-sold-out soiree, which this year raised more than \$1.9 million for the arts center's year-round residency and education programs, offered a few twists and turns for guests—the least of which was how best to dress for the “Circus of Stillness: the Power Over Wild Beasts” theme, a reference to the poet Ezra Pound.



As with any massive undertaking, let alone one that involves 24 art installations and an audience of 1,300 guests, it took a village. Helping oversee production and execution of the concept and design set forth by founder Robert Wilson was an intimate team that included event director Elise Herget; event manager Erin Wainwright; installation curator Noah Khoshbin; production supervisor Charlie Otte; and technical director Daniel Von Behr.

As the attendees, which included Christophe de Menil, Nicole Miller, Rufus Wainwright, Brooke Shields, John Varvatos, Pussy Riot's Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, and Public School designers Dao-Yi Chow and Maxwell Osborne, arrived, they were motioned not to pass through the entrance that had been used for nearly the past two decades. Rather, they were guided to a new pathway directly adjacent, where an entirely different experience awaited them.

Once past Mette Sterne's “Pink Eye Cray Cray (once it pops it will stop)” installation featuring human

figures adorned in balls and balloons, guests walked, single file, through a narrow canopy of bamboo trees past Ann Mirjam Vaikla's “Silencium” installation, which boasted masked figures wielding sledgehammers against monoliths. Once they emerged, a phalanx of servers with Casamigo tequila cocktails greeted them at a grand set of spacious steps. From there, it was an onward march past the Africa House and into the woods, where, in every corner, lay another grandiose form of artistic expression: everything from Cleon Peterson's 10-foot-tall red wooden “Marchers” that loomed large at the event's entrance and exit and Oree Holban's “The Wholesome Performer in the Woods” band to Jokubas Nosovas's “Canvas Dance” that featured the artist voguing as human paintbrush-cum-break-dancer and an original performance by Sierra Casady of the band CocoRosie.

If guests felt a bit turned around with this year's carnival-like program, that was precisely the intention of organizers. “Bob [Wilson] gave a lot of thought to the path this year ... the course was

completely flipped over and turned around on itself as the usual flow of traffic went in a complete opposite direction,” said Bill Wagner, the center’s managing director, of the decision to fully utilize the center’s new acreage, acquired three years ago. “One of the challenges was how to figure out where the end point was and where the exit would be so that people could stream out into the tent area in the most balanced and comfortable way.”

In the past, the center’s courtyard, which housed the silent auction and cocktail party, were the first things guests saw when they entered through the main building’s rock-festooned walkway. This year, that area was the last stop on the voyage through the 8.5-acre grounds chock full of site-specific installations and live performances.

“This year we tried to implement some nice and unique new changes in part due to the fact that we had planted and designed out beautiful garden beds on that side of the property that were full of color and texture,” said Wagner. “Bob wanted to enter through that entrance to see the newly designed garden bed and, also, the way the trails meandered, it was a more efficient way to get guests into the woods. The other approach required going through a more challenging entrance with rock bed.”

This year’s change in format also allowed first-time caterer Great Performances to introduce new elements. While in past years, cocktails were served on the guided walk through the woods surrounding the premises, allowing guests to enjoy the art pieces with drinks in the hand, this year, according to Shaun Roberts, event director at Great Performances, the decision was made to only pass drinks during initial arrivals and serve passed foods once the installations opened up to the main courtyard. The reasoning was one part practical—the narrow pathways didn’t lend themselves to servers lining them—and two parts artistic—it simply wouldn’t look good to have trays with drinks dotting an artistic landscape.

Instead, well-staffed bars (Great Performances bussed in approximately 130 servers) were complemented by a new, and food-heavy,

courtyard—a “Summer’s Savory Bazaar”—that, for the first time, allowed guests to help themselves to foods that fit in the palm of the hand as hors d’oeuvres were also passed. “We wanted to provide more food options for those just attending cocktails,” said Roberts, whose team started setting up on the day prior. “We chose the tartines, for example, to be an open-face food that exposed the beauty of the ingredients. Our emphasis was on showcasing the really great seasonal top-quality produce available.”

Rolls-Royce Motor Cars returned as a corporate sponsor of the fund-raiser and this time the luxury British automaker showcased its “Inspired by Fashion” edition Wraith coupe alongside a model in repose. Event sponsor and fine jewelry brand Plukka even opened a pop-up boutique in nearby Southampton with a portion of proceeds benefiting the center.

For dinner, Great Performances looked to avoid creating a gimmicky menu. “We didn’t play into the event theme whatsoever,” Roberts noted. Instead, the decision was made to serve a “substantial, but not heavy” meal and let the vibrant hues of the fresh produce serve as a visual contrast to the otherwise neutral and subdued dinner tables. That translated to a grilled peach with poached lobster starter followed by a grilled broiled New York strip steak served with sweet corn, squash, and salsa verde. And as a way to refresh guests in the summer heat, desserts consisted of blood-orange sorbet cones, cucumber lime and pineapple ginger frozen fruit pops, chocolate pretzel caramel tartlets, and miniature ice cream cookie sandwiches.

As with years past, dinner also held additional artistic offerings. Collaborative installations by the contemporary circus ensemble Cirkus Cirkör featured a trip of short, rope-infused vignettes—the theme of which was evident in the simplistic centerpieces of balls of rope—in between the meal proceedings, capped off by a live auction with Simon de Pury as M.C.