



March 23, 2011

The Armory Is the Artist's Canvas

By Rachel Stern

Most theater and music performances in New York offer a similar routine: viewers trickle into an auditorium, fill three sides while peering down at a center stage and clap at the commencement.

But then there are pieces such as John Luther Adams' *Inuksuit*, in which 78 percussionists with portable instruments drifted freely about the Park Avenue Armory's spacious Wade Thompson Drill Hall last month. They strummed glockenspiels, triangles and piccolos while audience members circled around them, some staking seats on the hardwood floors.

"The notion of the Armory is to facilitate non-traditional work," said Rebecca Robertson, director and executive producer. "Some work needs a different space for its realization."

As *Inuksuit* was written to be performed outdoors, no space other than the Armory's 55,000-square-foot Drill Hall could accommodate it, said Robertson of the piece that wrapped up the Tune-In Festival Feb. 20.



Anthropodino, an interactive sculpture by Ernesto Neto, was the first commissioned installation at the Park Ave. Armory.

Inuksuit was an example that the Armory—part arts center, part architectural marvel—is whatever the artist conceives it to be. Sometimes it's a space for music; sometimes it's a space for interactive art exhibitions. "It's really an educational experience," said Robertson, recalling how children who

visited have commented, "I didn't know you could touch art."

Built between 1877 and 1881 near 66th Street, the Armory houses what Kevin Stayton, curator of decorative arts at the Brooklyn Museum of Art, called “the single most important collection of 19th-century interiors to survive intact in one building.” These interiors are currently undergoing a \$200 million restoration, with \$16 million worth of refurbishments to Drill Hall just completed, said Robertson.

New York State’s Seventh Regiment of the National Guard, the first volunteer militia to heed President Lincoln’s call for troops in 1861, built the Armory. From the outside, it resembles a medieval castle draped in red brick, with towers at its frontal views. The interior, reminiscent of the original Grand Central terminal, is part palace and part industrial shed, designed by artists of the American Aesthetic Movement such as Stanford White and the Herter Brothers.

It was only in 2007 that the building opened its doors to performances, and in December 2010 that it launched its first full season of artistic programming.

The Armory has made its mark by nurturing the unconventional. In 2008, over 1,000 people gathered for Bernd Zimmerman’s opera *Die Soldaten*, a stark meditation on the consequences of war, viewed from movable seating on portable railway tracks. Most recently this year, da Vinci’s “Last Supper” was replicated as a three-dimensional walk-through by multimedia artist Peter Greenaway.

“This is a space which has no formality, which allows the artist to dream big,” said Robertson, who previously served as executive director of the Lincoln Center Development Project, Inc.

The next exhibition at the Armory will be Japanese artist Ryoji Ikeda’s “the transfinite,” in which visitors are submerged in a room with walls resembling thousands of silver needles meticulously combed together, representing projected and synchronized data. From May 20 to June 11, visitors will see how his work utilizes shadow and electronic sounds to infuse the senses.

There’s even room for the traditional. The Royal Shakespeare Company will take up a six-week residency July 6–Aug. 14, performing five classics in a full-scale replica of the Royal Shakespeare Theater.

“Essentialist Acts,” produced by the “Evil Knievel of Dance” Elizabeth Streb, will take acrobatics to a new level Dec. 14–22. Lastly, the famous Merce Cunningham Dance Company will bid its final farewell, culminating a two-year goodbye Legacy Tour, Dec. 29–31.

But evolution is part of the Armory’s mission: “Every experience here will not be like one we’ve had before,” said Robertson.

To schedule a 45-minute group tour of the period rooms in the Park Avenue Armory, 643 Park Ave. (betw. E. 66th and E. 67th streets), call 212-616-3937. For other inquiries, call 212-616-3930.