

YO!

ARTIST USES PUPPETRY, DANCE & MORE IN SHOW

By **SHAUN BRADY**
For the Daily News

AS THE FOUR-PERSON cast begins another run-through of "Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paper-Boy," their last scheduled rehearsal before a performance in front of schoolchildren, there is a moment of confusion when a gentle, string-laden music cue floats in where it doesn't belong.

"I just thought it was comforting," explained Sebastienne Mundheim, the show's creator and director, from the onstage perch where she narrates and controls the performance's sound from the laptop by her side.

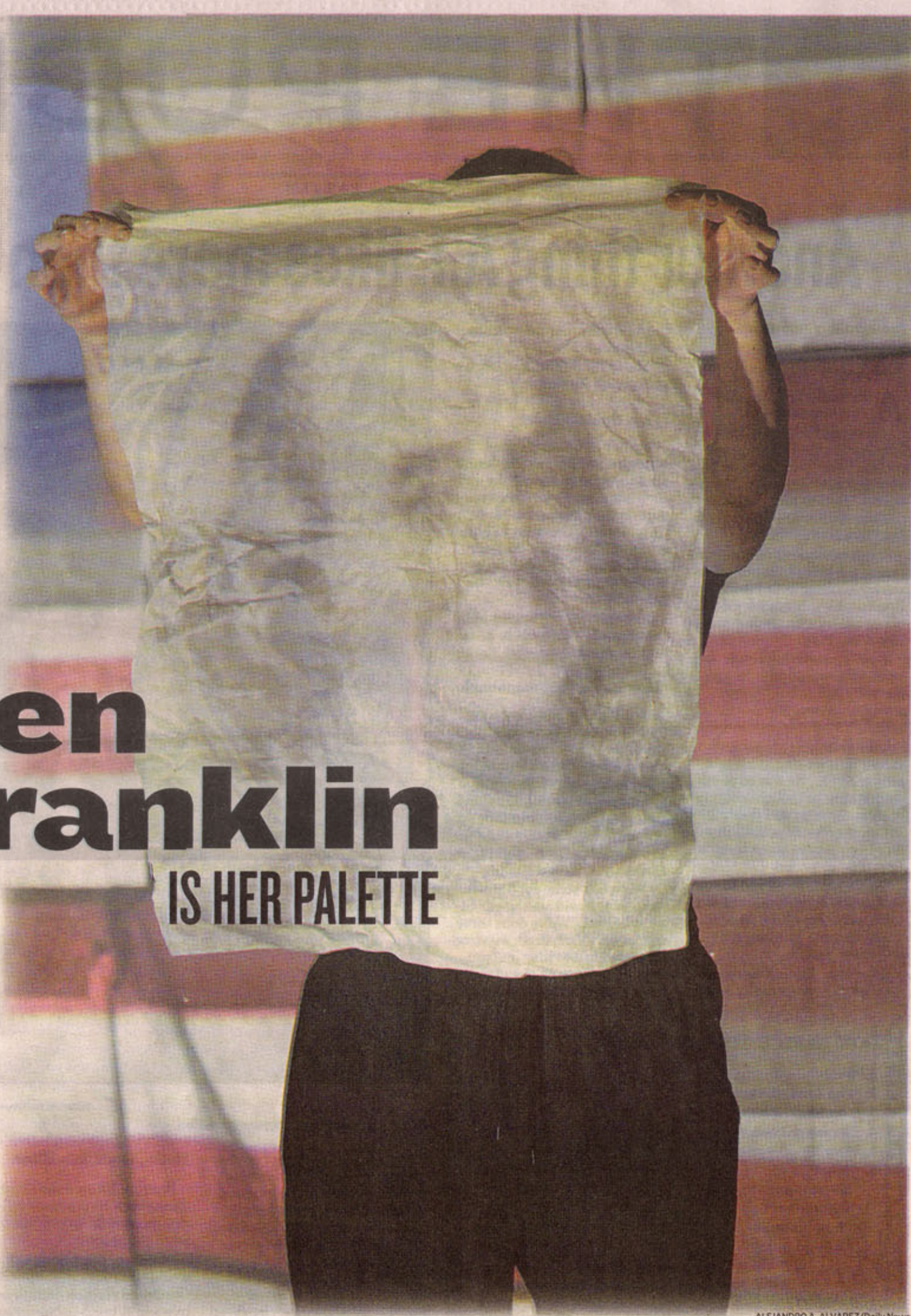
There's a sense of controlled chaos on stage. Some of it is intentional, as Mundheim and her cast adapt this multi-media piece about Benjamin Franklin to the constricted space at the Rotunda for a five-performance run Wednesday.

"I'm putting pressure on you guys because I do better if I'm terrified," Mundheim said apologetically.

The complexity of staging Mundheim's performance piece about Franklin results in part from the fact that there is very little separation between onstage and off. "Currently Franklin" is an intricately synchronized combination of puppetry, projections, dance, movement and narration. The performers also serve as de facto stagehands, and the changing of sets and movement of props are as essential to the choreography as the dance steps. Even the overhead projectors that supply the backdrops come into play onstage.

See **FRANKLIN** Page 39

Ben Franklin IS HER PALETTE



ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ/Daily News

Performer Karin Bookbinder holds up an image of a portrait of Benjamin Franklin during a dress rehearsal.

FRANKLIN

Continued from Page 33

"I like everything that is done to be done with intention," explained Mundheim, "which means that there's no reason why people shouldn't see it happening. And I also really like the mechanics of things."

Breaking the mold

It was a piece of mechanics that launched the Philadelphia-born artist on the path to multimedia performance. Since childhood, Mundheim had been sculpting small figures from clay, keeping them under her bed and occasionally creating scenarios with them.

For her senior class project at Westtown School in Chester County, she was taught to use a Macro lens, which allows photography of small objects at close range. With the camera and a \$400 budget, she shot slides of "85 little monsters," wrote a 20-page poem telling their stories, and performed the piece surrounded by four boom boxes with which she cued music.

Considering that work her "private world," Mundheim attended the University of Pennsylvania as a reluctant painting major.

"I liked painting, but I didn't feel like I was a painter. I didn't like being alone in a studio, and I didn't really understand the point of making little objects and going to galleries and selling them to people. The whole thing was just distasteful to me."

After graduation, Mundheim took a job teaching art in a summer program at Metairie Park Country Day School in New Orleans, despite being "terrified of kids."

The openness of the school to her creative ideas and the pleasure of translating her concepts for children proved to be life-altering for Mundheim. She found that her own approach to art was tailor-made for kids.

"I like things that are concrete, I like things that are simple, and I like things that have a lot of layers to them. So you can have a simple image that appeals to a kid and the other layers of possibility can work for somebody who has more experience and can attach more meaning to a symbol. I don't need to make something super-scary and have people running around naked."

All about the Benjamin

After returning to Philadelphia, Mundheim expanded her multi-media work, taking on new materials and new challenges



Photos: ALEJANDRO A. ALVAREZ/Daily News

Sebastienne Mundheim (above) narrates "Currently Franklin: The Story of a Paper Boy." Below, performer Charlie Delmarchelle with a cardboard doll representing a young Franklin.

with each piece. Eventually, commissions came in from area arts organizations including the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Rosenbach Museum, on subjects ranging from painter Giorgio de Chirico to writer James Joyce.

When Franklin and Marshall College contacted her in 2004 to create a piece for Benjamin Franklin's tercentenary, Mundheim was reluctant, given how ubiquitous his image was in the city. Her first instinct was to base her piece on how "contemporary unknowns maintain an icon."

But as she began to study Franklin (eventually reading nine books and speaking to Franklin scholars), her attitude began to change.

"I started to read about Franklin, and even though I thought I didn't like him, I started to really like him a lot."

Various ideas began to collect in Mundheim's imagination: images of water, which Franklin experimented with and traveled upon; his experiments with electricity; and his career as a printer and writer.

"I started to visualize the printing press," she said, "and I loved the idea of this solid structure that dispersed all this ephemera."

That concept is prominent in the show's set, which is largely composed of paper. Four racks made up of panels of paper serve as screens, windows and walls, and sheets of paper serve as multi-functional props. The hand-made quality of the paper sets and the cardboard-and-tape props arises from Mundheim's creative process.

"What excites me as a maker,"



she said, "is to do things that are really tactile. So, like the obsessiveness of wrapping things in tape and pushing the cardboard to make it do what I want it to do. I start making things and I understand what I'm doing based on the physical process of making."

The one word that cemented Mundheim's conception of the Franklin project was "current": currents of water and of electricity, Franklin's brother's newspaper, the *New England Courant*, and the ways in which Franklin's ideas can be thought to be current. Here, Mundheim found something of a kindred spirit in the aloof Founding Father and his interest in freely dispersing ideas

rather than taking ownership of them.

"He likes the specific mechanics of things, whether it's orchestrating a political scenario or the print shop or lightning. But he's never overly attached to anything. And I believe that with that mentality, we can be much more fluid and flexible and active. It's the moment that's interesting and that's energized, and that it's the energy that matters rather than the thing itself." ★

Rotunda, 4012 Walnut St., 7 and 9 p.m. Wednesday and Nov. 22, 8 p.m. Monday, \$15, \$10 students, \$8 ages 12 and under, 215-898-3900, foundationarts.org, sebastienmundheim.com.