

Buster Keaton's Stroll and Other Stories

By Kerry Reid

Buster Keaton's *Stroll and Other Stories*, Blair Thomas & Co., at the Actors Gymnasium. After working for years on epics like *Moby-Dick* for Redmoon Theater, which he cofounded, Blair Thomas has recently focused on chamber puppetry. The three short pieces in this "collection of solo puppet theater" draw on American iconography even though the title piece is by Federico Garcia Lorca. ("Buster Keaton's Stroll" also appeared in Thomas's all-Lorca show last fall, *The Poet, the Puppet & the Prisoner*.) The link between Lorca's surreal playlet, the New Orleans folk song "St. James Infirmary," and an excerpt from Wallace Stevens's "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" is the end of love, whether through death or doubt.

For the most part the material doesn't lend itself well to puppetry's literal interpretations. Particularly disappointing are Thomas's busy attempts to dramatize Lorca's bizarre tale of an infanticidal Keaton riding a bike through a bird-infested landscape. In Curt Columbus's staging, the battle for our attention between the language and the puppets ends in a stalemate. The St. James piece fares better, thanks in part to Thomas's unctuous turn as a creepy vaudeville emcee. But what carries the evening is the blackbird section. Using simple shadow puppetry--oil lamps behind black-and-white drawings on paper--Thomas eloquently, sensually brings to life Stevens's mournful and elliptical portrait of love grown distant and distrustful.