

Mumm's the word for fun

DANCE REVIEW

MUMMENSCHANZ

Skirball Center for the Performing Arts, 556 LaGuardia Place, 212-998-4941. Through Jan 6. Running time: 1:15 minutes, one intermission.

By LEIGH WITCHEL

HOW do you keep your act fresh after 40 years? Mummenschanz knows but, as always, nobody's talking.

The singular hybrid of mime and puppetry the Swiss-based group created seems awfully low-tech in this iPhone age. There are no words, music or technology, just four people in black bodysuits using

masks and props to perform theatrical sleight of hand.

Those New Yorkers whose parents took them to Mummenschanz in the late '70s, when the company enjoyed a three-year run on Broadway, may even recognize a few of the sketches the troupe's doing today, such as the needle-nosed insect seen on the original posters. But for today's kids, it's just as magical.

The latest editions opens with a hand puppet. Literally. An enormous hand — you can see the performer's legs below — parts the red curtains, while a second mammoth mitt wanders into the house to touch, then engulf, a hapless theatergoer.

You've got to hand it to Mummenschanz. The unique dance troupe is still creative and fun, even after 40 years of performing.

That's the specialty of the company, brief vignettes that give improbable objects very human characteristics. A huge green globe makes like Pac-Man, devouring what looks like a little asterisk. You can tell how awful it tastes when the green puppet puckers, spits the morsel out and tries to wipe off its enormous red tongue.

Nothing is as it seems. Tubes on a performer's hands become eyes in the darkness. Another creature has symmetrical blocks for arms, legs and an extra head — you're not sure which way is up. Several sketches are interactive: Balloons get battered into the audience, someone gets taped to his or her seat. Only those willing be part of the act

should sit in the first few rows.

Though the show could use some editing — the second half is a lot like the first — the individual sketches are quick and tight. The group has a knack for ending at the right moment: A rivalry of two men with masks of modeling clay finishes perfectly when they become stuck together.

Kids relate to the humor and fun, but Mummenschanz isn't just children's puppet theater. One of the company's classic routines involves a couple whose eyes, nose, ears and mouth are made of rolls of toilet paper. Unspooled, they become words of love or tears of sorrow.

For all the whimsy, there's still poetry at the core.

