

## 'Blackbird' flies from stage to page

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Blair Thomas, a co-founder of Redmoon Theatre and now an independent master puppeteer, has had a long-standing interest in putting his theater productions between covers. Now, after years of dreaming, his publication date has finally arrived.

Blackbird Book, a limited-edition artist's book that comes with a CD embedded in its cover--and is based on Thomas' scroll-and-shadow puppet show "The Blackbird"--is hot off the presses. It will be feted Wednesday in a benefit party at the Three Arts Club at 1300 N. Dearborn, which will include a brief performance and live accompaniment by the Aurea String Quartet. (Tickets are \$100, with snacks by Blackbird restaurant. Call 773-722-3248.) The next day, Thomas and Aurea will present a similar public performance at the Sherwood Music Conservatory, 1312 S. Michigan. Again there will be a puppetry segment set to Ben Johnston's "String Quartet #4." (Tickets are \$18. Call 312-427-6267.)

Thomas' self-produced book--with its unusual, handmade letter-press cover, its black-and-white and color pages, its startling mix of poetry (drawn from Wallace Stevens' seminal poem "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird") and its lovely drawings and pages of transparent overlays--is laced with suggestions of what the work looked like onstage. But it also has its own distinctive identity.

"Ever since my first show with Redmoon in 1989--"You Hold My Heart Between Your Teeth"--I had the idea of making a book," Thomas said. "I even put together a whole series of photos from that show, but as far as it got was to display it on a shelf in the Redmoon office. Then the business of making theater just took over my life.

"Blackbird is not the documentation of a show, but a book that I think stands on its own and holds its own weight. At the same time, I hope it carries a sense of the energy of the actual performance."

And what can a book do that puppet theater can't?

"Well, a book can travel, and it can live longer than I do," Thomas said with a laugh. "And it can evoke the piece even in places where it has never been performed, and maybe inspire people. The addition of the music can also bring some sense of the performance to the act of turning the pages."

And what is missing when a performance becomes a book?

"The unmatched communal experience of theater."

The 36-page book (which is in a limited edition of 1,000 copies) is \$45, but those attending the two publication events next week can buy it for \$30. Copies of the book will then be available at the Museum of Contemporary Art Bookstore and the gift shop of the Chicago Cultural Center, as well as at all upcoming performances by Thomas, including an engagement at the Actors Gymnasium in Evanston, where he will be performing "Buster Keaton's Stroll" and other pieces in September.

**Caption:** Blackbird Book, which chronicles Blair Thomas' scroll-and-shadow puppet show "The Blackbird," provides visual documentation of what the work looked like onstage while taking on an identity of its own.

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