

The world on a string - Artistry abounds with Puppetropolis Chicago

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Puppetropolis Chicago

General information, (312) 7"-3315

For children's shows, read Kid Zone in today's WeekendPlus.

Life-size puppets, masks, costumes and video clips are presented in "Julie Taymor: Playing With Fire," a new exhibit at the Field Museum. The original Howdy Doody marionette is on display in "It's Howdy Doody Time," a new exhibit at the Museum of Science and Industry. See Museum Pieces in today's WeekendPlus.

For years, puppet artists have been relegated to the avant-garde side of the stage, existing in an underground world visited only by the most adventurous theatergoer. But all that is about to change as the City of Chicago gets in on the act.

Puppetropolis Chicago, an international feast of puppet theater, has been added to the city's summer lineup of festivals. Puppet sources in city government and the theater community say the instigator was Mayor Richard M. Daley.

The mayor a puppet fan? Who knew?

"The mayor came to us over 18 months ago to talk about the universality of the art form," recalled Jim Law, executive director of the Mayor's Office of Special Events. "He saw a variety of cultures embracing it in different ways and felt an event like this would resonate within the multiethnicity of Chicago."

The Cultural Affairs Department, along with other organizing arms (Performing Arts Chicago, Redmoon Theater, the School of the Art Institute, the Field Museum, Lookingglass Theatre, the Actors Gymnasium, the Chicago Park District), have compiled a roster of performances at a variety of venues showcasing local puppeteers as well as those from around the country and the world.

A variety of lectures and workshops also are scheduled. The Urban Dream Capsule guys living in the store windows of the new Sears on State Street are part of Puppetropolis. And, throughout the week, a traveling troupe of 10 itinerant stages will set up shop and perform short puppet shows in Chicago neighborhoods.

In recent years, puppetry has taken on a whole new aesthetic. Mix the traditional with the unexpected, and you have modern-day puppetry.

"Puppets release us from the responsibilities of realism," said Redmoon artistic director Jim Lasko. "They release us into the world of fantasy and imagination."

In cooperation with the Museum of Contemporary Art, Redmoon will tackle one of its more ambitious projects: turning the windowed west side of the building into a giant shadow screen.

"As soon as I saw that building, I thought it would make the perfect screen," Lasko said. "This is a great chance for the general public to see something they normally would never see and for us to gain credibility and to show that we are part of a wider movement."

Organizers and artists involved in the festival say they know of no other such event in the

country. And by all accounts, Chicago is the perfect place for Puppetropolis to be born. For years, a colony of contemporary puppeteers, nourished by the 11-year-old Redmoon Theater, has helped make the city one of the country's most vibrant creative centers for the art form.

"The work at Redmoon really helped get puppetry into a more public eye," said Blair Thomas, who founded Redmoon and has since gone on to teach at the School of the Art Institute. "But we are just part of the puppetry renaissance that is going on in many different places."

It is this group of cutting-edge puppet artists and theaters that make up the core of the movement. Heather Henson, whose late father, Jim, introduced puppets into pop culture (via The Muppets), feels that an appreciation of puppetry is contagious.

"Once it hits a city, it starts to spread like wildfire," Henson said. "It's a great, limitless medium that has so many different roots. There is a lot of room to create your own language, and that is very attractive to artists."

Tamara Fielding, a dalang, or shadow master, specializes in Wayang Kulit, the traditional Indonesian art of shadow puppetry in which intricately carved rod puppets are used to tell mythical tales. She sees puppetry as a means of bridging cultures.

"I think this type of show can reach minds," Fielding said. "It can foster an appreciation for an art form as well as a culture that is very different."

Henson enjoys traveling to festivals and seeing the wide range of ideas that puppeteers work with. Puppetry works on a smaller, more intimate level than most theater.

"Audiences feel a part of it very quickly," Henson said. "It's always interesting to see where the puppeteers take it. They put their own personal twist on it and something deep within their soul is brought out."

Caption: Redmoon Theater's "Galway's Shadow" will be presented at night on the windows of an outdoor facade at the Museum of Contemporary Art. Shadow master Tamara Fielding will present "Tamara and the Shadow Theater of Java," a tale of her homeland performed with rod puppets. Heather Henson's "Echo Trace" celebrates the rhythms and cycles of nature with animate light, shadow, forms and sound. See also related stories page 31.

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