

‘People are hungry for puppetry’

Canceled last year due to COVID, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is back



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Chicago is a puppet town. Or was. Not only did the word “puppeteer” first see print here in 1915, but perhaps the most influential puppet show in American history, Burr Tillstrom’s “Kukla, Fran and Ollie,” debuted on TV here in 1947. It not only got parents buying televisions en masse, but — my own pet theory — the funny, ad-libbed program helped spawn Chicago’s live improv comedy scene in the 1950s.

Chicago is certainly Puppetville from now until the end of the month, as the 4th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival takes over, offering 100 performances from 20 local and national companies at more than a dozen locations, from the American Indian Center in Albany Park to the DuSable Museum in Hyde Park.

I’ve always felt an affinity to puppets. When the festival began in 2015, I threw “Puppetry Week” on my blog, and tried to explain the appeal:

“This odd subcellar of culture, part sculpture, part folk art, part vaudeville, also has personal appeal to me. There is a kinship between journalism and puppetry. Both require dedicated craftsmen, albeit in dwindling numbers, practicing a profession that neither thrives nor vanishes, but somehow remains perpetually defunct. Both are rough simulacra of life; both

had some legendary moment in the cultural spotlight in the hazy past — Hayden composed puppet operas for the royal court, a popular puppet dinner theater was steps off Michigan Avenue — but now linger on in the margins, practiced by various oddballs and misfits.”

Puppets are generally seen as comic, Kermit the Frog types. So it can surprise some that puppets are also dramatic, even tragic. Toni Morrison’s “The Bluest Eye” is being performed during the festival. One excerpt I saw in preview: Nick Lehane’s “The Chimpanzee,” to be performed at the Instituto Cervantes of Chicago Jan. 22-24, is a poignant, almost heartbreaking work about a chimp who once lived with a family, now mournfully remembering happier times, a captivity that strikes a chord in our COVID-19 locked-down world.

“When we see puppets, we see ourselves in the puppets’ experience,” said Chicago puppeteer Blair Thomas, the festival founder and artistic director. “When we are caught up in the suffering of the pandemic, the puppet world is not caught up in that, but reflecting back, a mirror to us.”

Last year Thomas didn’t consider holding the festival. Why risk it this year?

“Because we need to carry on with what we do,” he said, stressing that the performances are being conducted with safety in mind. “It’s important that the pandemic doesn’t halt us dead in our tracks. We have to adapt with the world that has changed. We have to live with COVID. It’s not going to go away.”

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Toni Morrison’s coming of age novel “The Bluest Eye,” interpreted as a puppet drama, will be performed Jan. 28-30 at the DuSable Museum of African American History as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, which begins Thursday. PROVIDED

petry,” added Sandy Gerding, the festival’s executive director. “There is a spiritual need to gather in the city, and we have a role to play. We’re helping to activate many theatergoers in many neighborhoods. It’s really powerful.”

While its focus now is artistry, the festival began for very practical reasons: to expand the market.

“I found it to be an inhospitable environment to be a puppeteer,” said Thomas. “There had to be more opportunities. The field needed to be broadened.”

It worked. COVID-19 notwithstanding, these are boom times for the Puppet Theater Festival. They have a new space in the Fine

Arts Building, and from now on the festival, previously biennial, will occur every year. The program for 2023, when they hope international performers will be able to return, is set.

“I’ve almost got it all booked,” said Thomas.

Why become an annual event? Doesn’t that double the workload?

“It helps us build momentum for rooting the festival in Chicago,” said Thomas. “We want to be a regular participant in the cultural landscape so everyone will anticipate that the last two weeks in January has this influx of excellent puppetry.”

No city in North America does

anything like this; there is a World Puppet Festival in September during odd years in Charleville-Mezieres, in northern France. Gerding went there in 2017.

“It was a treat to get to go,” she said. “The whole city, the size of Evanston, transforms. Bread shops have bread puppets in the window, flower shops have flower puppets. It really makes visible puppetry. It’s so inspiring.”

Can that work in a city the size of Chicago? Can we be a city known for its jazz, pizza, and puppetry?

Why not?

You can find the entire program online at chicagopuppetfest.org. Tickets are still available.