

The background of the cover features a dramatic scene with puppets. In the center, a puppet with a long white beard and a wooden face is being held. To its right, a puppet with long brown hair and a brown coat is visible. In the background, a person's face is partially seen, and a large black silhouette of a figure stands on the left. The lighting is a deep blue, creating a moody atmosphere.

CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL

Strategic Plan
2021-2026



THE STRATEGIC PLAN

2021-2026





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IBEX Puppetry (New York), First Nations spectacle *Ajijaak on Turtle Island* opens the 2019 Festival to sold-out houses and standing ovations at the Studebaker Theater

Photo: Richard Termine



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since it began, The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival has astonished and delighted audiences with a large-scale, international puppet festival every two years, resurfacing Chicago as the puppetry capital of the U.S. and bringing together hundreds of artists, many thousands of audience members, and dozens of cultural organizations and communities to enjoy puppetry. The Festival presents and celebrates puppet artists from around the globe as they perform shows across the city for adults and children. The Festival has been growing in all aspects—more shows, bigger audiences, and an expanding annual budget over the years as well as an enhanced reputation and impact.

Entering the planning stages for what was to be a 2021 Festival, the organization was in growth mode, seeking innovative approaches to engage new audiences and expand the reach of puppetry. When the pandemic, cultural upheaval, and quarantine took over, a committed team of supporters, colleagues and staff remained determined to advance the art of puppetry and took the time to focus internally on the development of a comprehensive 5-year strategic plan that would set a path for optimal growth and long-term sustainability. This plan was created as part of The Chicago Community Trust's prestigious SMART Growth Program.

The Puppet Festival team used a planning process which drew on insights, experiences, and aspirations from the full Festival community including performers, producers, supporters, audiences, and other stakeholders. This deep engagement process included: interviews; focus group gatherings; meetings with a core planning team; individual interviews with local thought leaders; a complete desk review; and numerous planning sessions with the Board of Directors, the Strategic Planning Committee and puppetry supporters from around the world.

Now with this plan in place, the Festival reclaims and strengthens its trajectory and even more firmly establishes Chicago as a cultural center for puppetry for Chicago and the world—preparing for the 2022 Festival as a part of this plan.

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is proud to share with you the resulting strategic plan for 2021–2026 and the big changes to come!



Artistic Director & Festival Founder, Blair Thomas from the 2017 Festival

Photo: Saverio Truglia



ABOUT THE FESTIVAL AND ITS EVOLUTION

Mission

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival advances the art of puppetry by presenting sophisticated programs vital to the cultural life of Chicago. Engaging and inspiring the largest and most diverse audiences for puppetry possible, the Festival also nurtures the development of puppeteers and deepens the field locally, nationally and internationally with the ultimate goal of promoting peace, equality, mutual understanding, and justice locally and globally.

History

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival was founded by puppeteer/director Blair Thomas in 2014 as a project within Blair Thomas & Co., his touring company that had begun in 2002. When Blair Thomas launched The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival it was a collaborative endeavor designed to elevate the mainstream understanding of the art by producing sophisticated work and presenting diverse contemporary artists. This was done in close partnership with numerous established cultural venues.

Over the course of the first three Festivals in 2015, 2017 and 2019, the Festival outgrew its role as a single program of Thomas' theater company. By 2017, the organization had become almost entirely devoted to the work of the international festival, and the name of the organization was formally changed from Blair Thomas & Co. to reflect that. The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is now the celebrated organization known today bringing world-class puppetry to Chicagoans with a growing set of programs and activities all of which are aimed at further strengthening the Festival and by extension the field of puppetry.

The Festival itself takes place over 10 days and is the largest event dedicated to the art form in North America, offering more than 100 activities including performances, workshops, family programs, and symposia for the general public in more than 20 different venues around Chicago. To date, the Festival has shared the best puppetry of our time with more than 44,000 guests through 283 performances in Chicago's major theaters and museums as well as its parks, cultural centers, and educational institutions. To do so, the Festival used a collaborative approach with Festival partners sharing the costs and risks associated with presenting. The Festival has continuously expanded the support it brings to that equation to include:



shared marketing and PR; financial and administrative support for visa applications; international airfare; artist fees, per diem, and lodging; local transportation; shared box office and centralized box office capability; and puppetry curation.

Over these few years, the Festival has presented 323 artists from 13 countries as well as from Chicago and across the U.S. in its effort to invite guests to experience cultures, perspectives, and narratives that are starkly different from their own. The Chicago Puppet Fest has a multicultural mission that requires the organization to center questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion in all its work. The 2017 Festival roster comprised 55% shows by women and presented a sold-out Iranian-American production at a moment when the U.S. had halted immigration from Iran. In 2018, the Festival deepened partnerships with organizations outside the city center and expanded its Free Neighborhood Tour while presenting 57% of programs by artists of color. The 2019 Festival presented work from Chile, Mexico, Puerto Rico, Japan, Israel, and several European nations in addition to a headline production performed by Native American / First Nations artists.

Feature coverage in *The New York Times*, *American Theatre Magazine*, Associated Press, and dozens more outlets have consistently indicated that the Festival is elevating consciousness of puppetry and shining an international spotlight on Chicago as an international hub for puppetry. Today, despite the effects of quarantine, this exciting trajectory continues.

Existing Programs

Numerous programs and activities have supported the Festival keeping fans engaged and increasing understanding of puppetry including:

- » Past off-season mainstage productions, such as the Festival's presentation of *No Blue Memories: The Life of Gwendolyn Brooks* in 2018, have responded to Chicagoans' ongoing hunger for puppetry and helped maintain the Festival's profile year-round.
- » The semi-annual Free Neighborhood Tour presents free, family-friendly puppetry performances by local, national, and international artists in parks and community centers in under-resourced neighborhoods.
- » The Catapult artists' intensive provides artists from Chicago and nationwide workshops, build time, critique, and work-in-progress performance opportunities as well as behind-the-scenes access to



Hamid Rahmanian (New York) opens the 2017 Festival with *Feathers of Fire* to sold-out houses and standing ovations at the Studebaker Theater



Existing Programs (cont.)

- leading artists during the Festival and in the offseason.
- » The Ellen Van Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium convenes during the Festival and invites the general public to join puppetry artists and scholars from diverse fields in high-level discussion of the art form.
- » The Living Room Tour is a semi-annual benefit event series offering intimate performances, dinner, and conversation in private homes.
- » The monthly Studio Open House series offers direct access to local artists through performances and hands-on demonstrations at Festival headquarters in the Fine Arts Building and helps new and existing Festival fans connect with the organization's work in a casual, fun environment.
- » The new Chicago Puppet Studio is a for-hire puppetry design and fabrication workshop serving Chicago and the Midwest as well as a site for public puppetry training.

Staffing

Since 2016, the Festival has been led by two full-time staff Artistic Director & Festival Founder Blair Thomas, full-time Managing Director Sandy Smith Gerding, with a part-time Business Manager. The company supplements its promotional, fundraising, production and other activities by employing up to 35 contractors during the Festival and enlisting interns and volunteers. To initiate the Chicago Puppet Studio and ongoing workshops, the Chicago Puppet Fest welcomed experienced puppeteers and designers on a contract basis. The growing Chicago Puppet Fest team comprises several women and individuals identifying as LGBTQIA+ and BIPOC.

Intention — Why Puppetry?

Puppetry is a rich, incisive, and paradoxical art form that calls on inanimate objects to remind us all of our shared human experience. Puppetry has a disarming quality that positions it uniquely to illuminate, communicate and connect diverse people. When we watch puppeteers bring their creations to life, we experience something profound: we instinctively, instantly empathize with an Other we had not recognized before. In the moment, it is irresistible. We can't help but extend a part of ourselves to the puppet, to share in its experience and invest in its autonomy.

Puppetry is ubiquitous and ancient—there is hardly a historical or contemporary culture worldwide that does not boast a distinct puppetry tradition. From Javanese Wayang-style shadow puppetry to Japanese bunraku-style puppetry to Pulcinella in Italy, Guignol in France, and Punch in England—worldwide, animated figures and storytelling objects have special social roles to play in entertainment, ritual, ceremony, and education.



These qualities—unique to puppetry—are the foundation of the Festival's work provoking insight and sparking empathy in its thousands of fans and followers. By bringing diverse puppetry forms together, the Festival gives broad audiences the singular opportunity to experience multiple distinct cultures and puppetry traditions all at one time. Chicago is an ideal site for this work—a city with a rich artistic history, and one ready to be strengthened by healing across lines of race, class, and culture. The intention of The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is to harness this opportunity for empathy and mutual understanding that puppetry uniquely creates.

Values

We believe:

- » **The art of puppetry is a universal language.**
- » **Puppetry nourishes our sense of wonder.**
- » **The art of puppetry is as much for adults as it is for children.**
- » **Puppetry is positioned uniquely to illuminate the shared human experience and create community.**
- » **Puppetry disarms and opens minds, bridging differences in culture, age, education, class and perspective to connect diverse people.**
- » **A multiplicity of voices and offerings is key to developing excellence in the field.**
- » **Educating and cultivating puppeteers and audiences increases respect and appreciation for the form.**
- » **Presenting world-class puppetry at citywide scale places the art of puppetry as a jewel in the center of Chicago's cultural landscape.**



Geumhyung Jeong (South Korea) performs 7ways at Links Hall

Photo: Wooshik Lee



ANNOUNCING THE 5 YEAR VISION THROUGH 2026

The **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival** is a greatly anticipated **highlight of Chicago's cultural landscape** and a **forefront destination globally for contemporary puppetry**. It redefines and elevates the mainstream notion of puppetry, fostering cross-cultural understanding in a pluralistic world.

THE FESTIVAL BECOMES AN ANNUAL EVENT and in doing so transforms Chicago into an epicenter of puppetry each winter. It is cherished, respected and championed across Chicago by a growing audience informed and inspired by the work.

A CHICAGO PUPPET SCHOOL IS ESTABLISHED to provide regular, sequential, excellent training for the professional artist and the amateur enthusiast alike while diversifying the field. In person and online courses are offered by a diverse group of artist instructors who are experts in the field. **A PUPPET LABORATORY IS CREATED** for longer term incubation opportunities for the development of new work.

THE CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL IS EASILY RECOGNIZED AS AN ESTABLISHED CHICAGO INSTITUTION: financially stable, artistically strong, collaborative and representative of Chicago. The Festival establishes an **inclusive artistic curatorial** structure ensuring sustainability and relevance. It **inspires and continues to merit the broad support** it takes to maintain a consistent staffing and visionary volunteer leadership. An energized board **attracts substantial and predictable, multi-year funding** from local, national, and international funders as well as a large base of individuals.



Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins (US/North Carolina) performs *Just Another Lynching* at the Living Room Tour and at Links Hall

Photo: Robin B. Pipkins



THE OVERARCHING ORGANIZATIONAL GOALS

- » To advance the art of puppetry by championing live, excellent, contemporary puppetry and the puppeteers who make it.
- » To operate an organization which is strong, resilient and has the capacity to advance the art of puppetry.

Strategic Goal #1:

Present Visible, Accessible, World-Class International Puppetry Offerings

1) The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival becomes an annual event at the largest scale resources allow

- Changing the Festival from Biennial to Annual
- Keeping the Festival in winter -- last two weeks of January
- Concentrating additional presenting programs within the Festival time period (ie. Free Neighborhood Tour, Symposium, The Catapult)
- Assuring equity, access and representation across all aspects of Festival presentations
- Creating a rotating curatorial committee for programs
- Maintaining the mix of —50% International, 25% National, 25% Local artist representation
- Building the field of puppetry with professional partnerships, networking, and discourse

2) The Festival contributes to “field building” in puppetry

- Encouraging partnerships amongst national and international presenters and funders
- Providing networking opportunities for international festival leaders
- Collaborating with existing Puppetry Service Organizations
- Increasing field building partnerships with UNIMA, Puppeteers of America, POCl, Festivals, etc.

Strategic Goal #2:

Strengthen the Chicago Puppetry Community in Number, Diversity, Reputation, and Quality

1) Establish a Chicago Puppet School

- Advancing puppeteers’ skills and offering education to the largest and most diverse general public possible offered online and in person



- Creating a sequentially progressive and comprehensive puppetry curriculum prioritizing excellence in the form
- Providing consistent and generous scholarship opportunities to promote access and equity, and countering societal inequities (e.g. abilities, race, socio-economic)
- Create access to online resources for puppetry learning and community development

2) Establish a Chicago Puppet Laboratory

- Diversifying the authors, voices, styles, and forms of puppetry
- Providing puppeteers structured support and community context for the development of excellent work

3) Cultivate Chicago's vitality as an epicenter of professional puppetry

- Operating the Chicago Puppet Studio providing high-quality puppetry design, fabrication and innovation for the local and national theater community through self sustaining contracts
- Providing fiscal sponsorship and developmental support for puppeteers
- Providing teaching opportunities for professional puppeteers
- Promoting puppeteers and their work by amplifying the voices of puppet companies and puppeteers

Strategic Goal #3:

To Stabilize, Sustain, and Grow into an Institution

1) Structure and staff a healthy, sustainable and inspiring work environment using the non-profit model

- Increase staff with year-round positions; part-time and full-time
- Define and distribute workload to assure quality service to all stakeholders
- Create staffing structure with an eye toward scalability and succession
- Foster a culture that attracts, strengthens, retains and inspires excellent colleagues

2) Increase and diversify earned and donated resources to ensure robust programming

- Integrate puppetry experiences into all fundraising activities
- Achieve and maintain a budget of over \$1M



- Establish a cash reserve equivalent to 6 months of general operating budget
- Prioritize non-festival programs that are self-sustaining or earn income in order to increase financial stability (ie. workshops, pop up lectures)

3) Engage and inform audiences/the public with consistent, visible, high-quality experiences about puppeteers and the form

- Become a major presence in Chicago's cultural season
- Harness the power of the Festival by focusing presentation programming at that time
- Provide opportunities for puppetry enjoyment, exposure and education year-round both online and in person (ie. Puppet in Place, Open Houses, digital content, digital tutorials)

4) Increase inclusive, flexible leadership opportunities to expand local, civic participation

- *Volunteer Leadership:* Engage more board members, advisory board members, curatorial advisors across age, race and socio-economic level
- *Donor Leadership:* Expand donor base and opportunities for individuals to champion programs and participate in making programs come to fruition
- *Institutional Leadership:* Through more consistent, annual presence secure more partners, sponsors, and underwriting with private-public partnerships



Compagnie Non Nova (France) delights full houses at Chicago Shakespeare's The Yard with *L'Après-midi d'un foehn* (*Afternoon of a Föhn*)

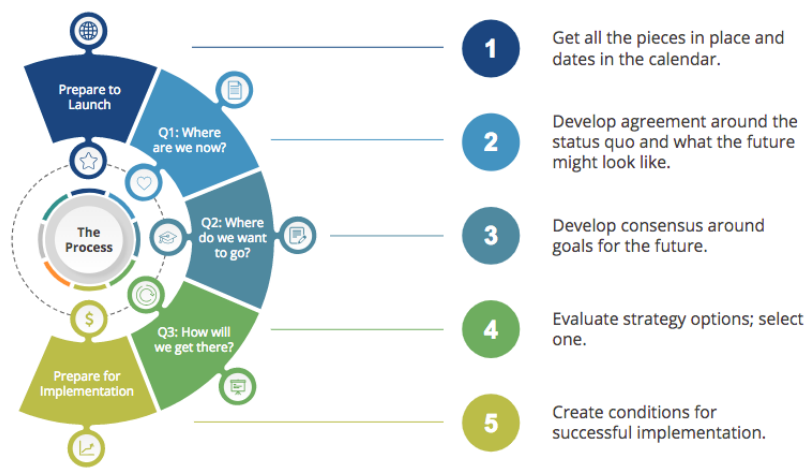
Photo: Jean-Luc Beaujault



SUMMARY INFORMATION ABOUT THE PLANNING PROCESS FROM CONSULTANTS, STRATEGY MATTERS

Strategy Matters used a five-step model for building the strategic planning, focused on efficiently engaging the maximum number of stakeholders -- anyone who will be impacted by the work of The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. The process was designed to support the Festival's Board and staff in developing alignment and consensus around the answers to three questions:

- » Where are we now?
- » Where do we want to go?
- » How will we get there?



The planning process launched in spring 2020 by convening a Strategic Planning Committee (SPC). The SPC provided leadership and guidance, and leveraged their own networks to support the process.

To answer “Where are we now?” a very significant stakeholder engagement process was undertaken to draw insights from hundreds of individuals including:

- Long form one on one interviews with individual stakeholders
- Focus groups spearheaded by Strategic Planning Committee members representing 8 focus areas:
 - ◇ Festival presenting partners
 - ◇ Arts service organizations
 - ◇ Separate groups of local, international, and national puppeteers and presenters



- ◊ Donors and supporters
- ◊ Board members
- ◊ Local non-puppetry arts organizations
- Surveys answered by 274 respondents

Through each of these vehicles, Strategy Matters gathered the insights and aspirations of the many puppeteers, supporters, producers, audience members and partners who together make The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival the vibrant organization it is today.

Together these many voices and components supported the development of a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. The SPC examined the SWOT and convened to consider the implications for The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival's future. The SPC conducted multiple workshops aimed at developing consensus around goals, and those goals became the backbone of this plan.

To answer the question “Where do we want to go?” an environmental scan was completed to help contextualize the planning and provide a platform for smart decision making. The SPC considered different strategies for reaching the goals, and those strategic decisions are embedded in the plan presented. At the core of this strategy is a continued focus on Chicago at the center of The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival's work, and a renewed focus on expanding offerings in addition to the more frequent festival to support greater diversity in puppetry, education for artists and non-artists, and puppeteer development supported by building the Festival's supporter base and promoting wider audience engagement.

To answer the question “How will we get there?” The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival will take more steps toward growth by creating an Implementation Plan internally at the staff level. The strategic planning process yielded steps that will be key to implementation including advancing volunteer leadership through board and committee development, a renewed branding across programs as well as a strengthened staffing plan. All are designed to increase capacity and resiliency for the organization itself.



Plexus Polaire (France/Norway) astonishes packed houses opening the 2017 Festival with *Cendres (Ashes)* to standing ovations at Victory Gardens Theater

Photo: Kristin Aafloy Opdan



THE NEXT STEPS

Now with the mission, vision and strategy set, internally the organization moves to the implementation of the plan at the staff level. Externally we are looking for new partners and collaborators to expand our base of existing support. If you would like more information about this plan or to learn more about specific program strategies and how to support them, please connect with us.

CONNECT WITH US

For more information about The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, and to learn more about updates, visit www.chicagopuppetfest.org.

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ADDENDUM

SPECIAL THANKS

It is with deep gratitude that we thank Christy Uchida for her steadfast leadership of the Strategic Planning Committee in collaboration with board members: Kim Ohms and Jes Sherborne. Thank you to our excellent Strategic Planning Committee members as well as to the Strategy Matters consulting team for facilitating this entire process, the Board of Directors and the Advisory Board. Special thanks to Cheryl Lynn Bruce, Alison Cuddy, Katherine Dysard, Cheryl Henson, Heather Henson, Mark Kelly, Liz Liebman, Kerry James Marshall, Krsity Moran, Chuck Thurow, Tim Tierney and Angel Ysaguirre, Jackie Zydeck.

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Director & Founder, Blair Thomas with Managing Director Sandy Gerding in
NewCity's "The Fifty People Who Really Perform for Chicago" 2019

Photo: Joe Mazza, Brave Lux



Silencio Blanco performs *Pescador (Fisherman)* at Instituto Cervantes of Chicago

Photo: Nathaly Arancibia



PROGRAMS AT A GLANCE

FESTIVAL: Presenting World-Class Puppetry

- Festival Performances
- The Free Neighborhood Tour
- The Catapult Program
- The Ellen Van Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium
- Exhibitions/Installations

FIELD BUILDING: Nurturing the Development of Professional Puppeteers and Presenters

- Partnerships with puppetry service groups
- Professional Presenters Gatherings
- Festival Exchanges
- New Work Development

ENGAGEMENT & DEVELOPMENT: Galvanizing Energy & Resources in Support of the Festival

- Open Houses
- The Living Room Tour fundraisers
- Dinner Events
- Opening Night Events
- Sponsorship, Partnership, and Underwriting Opportunities
- Digital Educational Resources -- online forum, documentation, tutorials, interviews
- Digital access to past, present, and future productions and artistic content

CHICAGO PUPPET SCHOOL: Teaching Puppetry Skills at All Levels, Digital & In Person

- Pop Up Lectures
- One-day workshops
- Weekend intensive workshops
- Multi-week workshops
- Workshop scholarship program
- Chicago Puppet Laboratory -- building toward professional puppetry presentations



CHICAGO PUPPET STUDIO: Creating Professional Puppet Theater Design, Manufacturing & Performance

Freelance Contract Work (e.g. *Steadfast Tin Soldier* with Lookingglass Theatre)

Collaborative Project Development (e.g. *Vancouver* project with Ma-Yi Theatre)

Fiscal Sponsorship for Puppeteers & Puppet Companies (e.g. Rootstock)

Project Realization -- supplemental artistic direction, administrative support, production support, project management and project development (e.g. Ty Defoe's *Spirit Canoe*, Jerrell Henderson's *I Am the Bear*, Tom Lee & Koryu Nishikawa V's *Akutagawa*)





Argentinian theater maker Mariano Pensotti presents *Arde brillante en los bosques de la noche* (Burning bright in the forest of the night) at the MCA Stage

Photo: Loderndes Leuchten



chicagopuppetfest.org

Cover: Koryu Nishikawa V and Tom Lee (Japan/US) bring *Shank's Mare* to sold-out houses and added shows at the Art Institute's Stock Exchange Trading Room

Photo: Ayumi Sakamoto