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CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

A Beacon of Warmth and Light: Puppets Take Chicago

Crowds are flocking to an annual festival for performances of “A Doll’s House,” a “Macbeth”-inspired witch tale and more featuring puppets big and small.



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Reporting from Chicago

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The temperature outside was zero degrees Fahrenheit and falling. Hibernation would have been a logical response. But on the shores of Lake Michigan in January, the locals are used to persevering in the face of brutal cold — while maybe improvising slightly, in the interest of kindness and common sense.

So it proved at “A Doll’s House” on the first weekend of the [Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival](#). Early Friday evening at an old, Broadway-style theater near Grant Park, the 600-strong crowd was waved inside on the honor system. Checking that many tickets would have caused the line to snake down the sidewalk as audience members turned to icicles, and the festival decided: better not.

Inside, the buzzing throng might have surprised me, except for two things. This was my second show of the day, and the first — a matinee of Manual Cinema’s “The 4th Witch” — had filled its theater. Also, this “A Doll’s House,” a variation on Ibsen’s classic by the French-Norwegian company Plexus Polaire, is the production that lured me to Chicago, where I’d first seen its work in 2017. “A Doll’s House” was an American premiere, and only three performances were planned. Of course devotees were undeterred.

Don’t get me wrong; New York has a vibrant puppet theater scene, with notable upcoming events that include the new musical [“Goosey’s Toxic Aquatic Adventure,”](#) starting Feb. 4 at the Bushwick Starr in Brooklyn, and [Puppetopia](#), the annual downtown mini-festival from Basil Twist’s Dream Music Puppetry program, starting Feb. 17 at Here Arts Center.

But the Chicago festival, which runs through Sunday, and presents work aimed mainly at grown-ups, is a concentration of abundance in a city that has become a major hub of American puppetry. No themes or standout trends, but plenty of variety. (Speaking of which: This week’s [lineup](#) is completely different from what I saw last weekend.)



Manual Cinema’s “Macbeth”-inspired tale “The 4th Witch” uses intricate paper cutouts, onstage actors and overhead projectors to tell a movie-like story on a suspended screen. Alexander Coggin for The New York Times

A dreamlike quality inhabits even the most lucid puppet theater, each show a different reverie — or nightmare. In [“The 4th Witch,”](#) Manual Cinema’s “Macbeth”-inspired tale, set during what looks like a blend of the first and second world wars, a girl loses her parents when Macbeth’s forces drop bombs on their idyllic town. In the nearby forest, she is taken in by an old woman who lives in a picturesque cottage with a watermill. But the child’s sleep is full of terrible visions from which she wakes frightened and breathing hard: witches and toadstools, potions and vengeance, floating daggers and Birnam Wood. Macbeth, too, dressed for military menace.

Conceived and directed by Drew Dir, and performed in the company’s signature retro, handmade style, the show uses intricate paper cutouts, onstage actors and overhead projectors to tell a movie-like story on a suspended screen. With principal characters played by a combination of shadow puppets and humans (including Sarah Fornace as the girl, Julia Miller as the lead witch and Jeffrey Paschal as Macbeth), the live action that creates the illusion is carried out below in full view of the audience. The mood-shaping music (by Ben Kauffman and Kyle Vegter) is played live, too (by Alicia Walter, Lia Kohl and Lucy Little): cello, violin, piano and ethereal vocals.

Manual Cinema, which has toured internationally, is the pride of the Chicago puppetry scene, beloved for both its art and its prominence. This was the show’s hometown premiere. It is a dark work, full of pain and loss, but then the darkness lifts. Will it spoil anything if I say it has a charming, funny, life-affirming ending?



In Plexus Polaire's critical remix of "A Doll's House," Yngvild Aspell plays Nera Helmer even as she puppeteers the cast of realistic, life-size puppets. Alexander Goggin for The New York Times

Yngvild Aspeli, Plexus Polaire's artistic director, heads in a very different direction with ["A Doll's House,"](#) her critical remix of Ibsen's 19th-century play about a woman, Nora Helmer, who pretends to her husband that she is purely ornamental — though she has long since rescued him from death, and he has no idea of her sacrifice.

Aspeli, who directs with Paola Rizza, is also the star, playing Nora even as she puppeteers the cast of realistic, life-size puppets. At first sight, the ensemble is eerie as can be in fixed tableau: Nora's three young children, over near the Christmas tree; Torvald, her condescending spouse, more central; and in the upstage gloom, their friends.

When Torvald lectures Nora on the importance of avoiding debt and adds, "Do you hear me?," it's Aspeli who speaks his words and manipulates him. She is likewise utterly in charge when Nora wrangles her unruly little ones, and they cling comically to her all at once. For quite a while, it seems to be a one-woman show, though Torvald is eventually played by an actor-puppeteer (Viktor Lukawski) rather than a puppet, and a hidden puppeteer (Léa Bres) pitches in.

This deliberately scrambled re-envisioning of the play downgrades the narrative importance of Dr. Rank, Nora's one true ally, but is brilliantly inventive in its refraction of her tarantella dance, with the appearance in her home of puppet tarantulas in an array of startling sizes.

With puppet direction by Rowan Magee, who wrote the show with Shivak, "Rhynoceron" is a sui generis work of imagination, and it is understandable to want to put it in front of as many people as possible. But if a swath of the audience is, in effect, excluded from much of the storytelling, the spell the performance casts will not reach them. It deserves to.

Though most of the festival productions I saw were within easy range of the L, one required a drive through the snow: Laura Heit's ["The Matchbox Shows,"](#) which are exactly what the title suggests: micro plays set in artfully repurposed matchboxes. Heit enacted them on a tabletop while we watched them enlarged, projected on a screen. Narrative is not a strength of these odd little shows, but the visuals are fun. Fire figures prominently. Maybe I should have expected that?



From behind a table, Laura Heit brings to life her miniature cabaret called "The Matchbox Shows." Alexander Coggin for The New York Times



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Elsewhere, the one show that blindsided me with its quiet — well, OK, crinkly — beauty was a late replacement for another that had fallen through. Blair Thomas, the festival's founder and artistic director, paired two short new works of his own.

The curtain raiser, which also starred Silas Thomas, his son, was "Passing Through the Bardo," a cheerfully nutso comic addition to the niche of entertainments about Elmer McCurdy of "Dead Outlaw" fame. Then, having left our tenderness placidly undefended, Thomas swooped in with "Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?," performing it with the saxophone quartet [~Nois](#).

The story of a dog and a human, narrated by the dog, it's like a giant, four-panel graphic novel, painted on four 100-foot-long, side-by-side paper scrolls that Thomas hand-cranks in meticulous sequence, as he moves from side to side and back again underneath their frame. Shadow puppets (by Linda Wingerter) are involved as well. Thomas describes the piece as a koan; I describe it as exquisitely graceful and profoundly human — the tactility, the timing, the breath.

In hobbled written English, the dog asks at the very start, "Where me warm spot in this cold place?" For some of us, the answer is obvious: at the theater, being puppet-mesmerized.

Outside, after the show finished, it was 7 degrees. Which, by the end of the weekend, didn't feel all that bad.