



## 8<sup>TH</sup> Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival



## Press Coverage Report

May 20, 2026

## 2026 press coverage highlights

### 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, January 21-31, 2026

- *The New York Times* returned after covering the 2nd Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in 2017. Laura Collins-Hughes' mid-festival round-up included reviews of Plexus Polaire's *The Doll House*, Manual Cinema's *The Fourth Witch*, KT Shivak's *Rhynoceron*, and Blair Thomas's *Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?*
- See additional national coverage in *American Theatre Magazine* (twice) and *Cultural Attache*.
- 2026 marked the second consecutive year CIPTF made *Chicago Magazine's* Top 10 events in January.
- Both major papers ran pre-festival preview features: A large roundup in the *Chicago Tribune*, and a full-page story about Blind Summit's *The Sex Lives of Puppets* in the *Chicago Sun-Times*.
- See additional previews in the January issue of *New City (Left Hand of Darkness)*, along with *Chicago Star Newspaper*, *Hyde Park Herald*, *Chicago Reader*, *Third Coast Review*, *Block Club Chicago* and *Time Out Chicago*.
- TV placements included NBC5 "Matt in the Morning" live from Chopin with *Rhynoceron* and Blair, Blair live, in-studio with Wakka Wakka on Fox 32's *Chicago Now*, and sizzle reel placement in ABC7's *Weekender*.
- Radio placements included Blair interviewed on WBBM-AM 780 News Radio and WGN 720 AM Sunday Morning with Dean Richards, and a Manual Cinema *The Fourth Witch* audio feature by Mike Davis for WBEZ 91.5 FM.
- Chris Jones, *Chicago Tribune*, reviewed Manual Cinema's *The Fourth Witch* and Blind Summit's *The Sex Lives of Puppets* mid-festival, and continued positive mentions of CIPTF in subsequent reviews of other shows and in his Monday *Chicago Theater Loop* email.
- Preview and review coverage ran throughout the fest via key local entertainment blogs and outlets including *Buzz Center Stage*, *Chicago Stage and Screen*, *Chicago on the Cheap*, *Around The Town Chicago*, *Chicago Parent* and *Chicago Kids*.
- Total placements retrieved in 2026, at 71, increased 18 percent this year over last year (60, in 2025). 2026 also marked a near return to total coverage levels from our top performing year: 74 placements in 2024.

- This increase is largely due to a surge in online coverage versus traditional media formats, which syncs with information migrating online over TV, radio and print. A continued decrease in TV placements marks an area for improvement in 2027.
- The following year-by-year coverage comparison notes results from *CIPTF* PR efforts only, and doesn't include results from partner placements, notably *The Enormous Crocodile* (requested but not received). In addition, each placement is noted once by its "primary" media type. For example, a print placement that also ran online is counted once, as print.

<b>CIPTF total placements by year and type</b>				
<b>Year</b>	<b>2026</b>	<b>2025</b>	<b>2024</b>	<b>2023</b>
TV	2	6	10	8
Radio	3	1	5	1
Print	17	22	23	19
Online	49	31	36	30
<b>Total</b>	<b>71</b>	<b>60</b>	<b>74</b>	<b>58</b>

- The following press coverage manifest lists all 2026 festival placements in chronological order starting with our announcement on November 3, 2025. Click on any individual placement that follows to link to the story online.

## **8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival 2025-26 press coverage manifest**

Chicago Tribune, Chris Jones Theater Loop email, exclusive festival anct 11.3.25

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d3Zz7jnR68eE-5WneRtH6OmOMxN\\_DtQv/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1d3Zz7jnR68eE-5WneRtH6OmOMxN_DtQv/view?usp=drive_link)

Broadwayworld, 8CIPTF anct 11.3.25

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/chicago/article/CHICAGO-INTERNATIONAL-PUPPET-THEATER-FESTIVAL>Returns-This-January-20251103>

Chicago Parent, 8CIPTF listing posted 11.4.25

<https://www.chicagoparent.com/events/chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-chicago/>

Buzz Center Stage, 8CIPTF anct 11.14.25

<https://www.buzznews.net/theatre/upcoming-theatre/item/6069-8th-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-returns-january-21-february-1-2026-welcoming-puppeteers-from-around-the-globe-to-north-america-s-largest-puppet-fest.html>

Newcity, Today in Culture tickets on sale 11/12 blurb with link to site 11.11.25

<https://www.newcity.com/2025/11/11/today-in-culture-tuesday-november-11-2025-auditorium-theatres-restoration-plans-loops-resto-recovery-dick-clarks-new-years-rockin-eve-adds-chicago/>

Broadwayworld, tickets on sale anct 11.12.25

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/chicago/article/CHICAGO-INTERNATIONAL-PUPPET-THEATER-FESTIVAL>Returns-In-January-20251112>

Chicago Tribune, C Jones Theatre Loop email inc CROC Cyber Monday deal 12.1.25

No link

Broadwayworld, final lineup announcement 12.16.25

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/chicago/article/Chicago-International-Puppet-Theater-Festival>Returns-in-January-20251216>

Time Out Chicago, listing posted 12.16.25 (requested corrections twice - inc fix low ticket price)

<https://www.timeout.com/chicago/theater/chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-1>

Chicago Star Newspaper, preview feature 12.17.25

[https://www.chicagostarmedia.com/global-puppet-artists-come-to-chicago-jan-21-feb-1-for-eighth-annual-fest/article\\_7415546f-4717-4c7a-8e63-35377655c0bb.html](https://www.chicagostarmedia.com/global-puppet-artists-come-to-chicago-jan-21-feb-1-for-eighth-annual-fest/article_7415546f-4717-4c7a-8e63-35377655c0bb.html)

American Theatre Magazine, Jerald Pierce December column includes fest preview & sizzle video 12.19.25

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2025/12/19/seeking-new-chicago-theatre-hangouts/>

Puppet Happenings Newsletter, Jim Henson Foundation, Dead as a Dodo "Top Pick" listing (plus other show and workshop listings) 12.26.25

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=6617f6cd35&view=lg&permmsgid=msg-f:1852568363960455754>

Chicago Magazine, Top 10 events in January Agenda item, in print 12.15.25, posted 12.29.26  
<https://www.chicagomag.com/chicago-magazine/january-2026/january-agenda-3/>

Reklama, Festival preview 1 by Sergey Elken posted 12.29.25 cover (?) of January print issue  
<https://thereklama.com/8th-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-chast-i/>

Spotlight On Lake, Fest announcement 12.30.35  
<https://www.spotlightonlake.com/posts/8th-chicago-intl-puppet-theater-fest-present-puppeteers-around-globe>

Hyde Park Herald, preview by Anne Spiselman - south side show focus posted 12.29 in print 12.31.25  
[https://www.hpherald.com/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/a-puppet-fest-preview/article\\_42116ef2-e510-484d-8670-1d35c2429d83.html](https://www.hpherald.com/arts_and_entertainment/a-puppet-fest-preview/article_42116ef2-e510-484d-8670-1d35c2429d83.html)

City Cast Chicago, Guide to January 2006 in Chicago inc CIPTF, MCinema, Alva, LHeit 1.2.26  
FF to 4:25 - 6:20 for conversation  
<https://chicago.citycast.fm/podcasts/your-guide-to-january-2026-in-chicago>

Chicago Asian Network, Left Hand of Darkness preview 1.4.26  
<https://www.chicagoasiannetwork.com/event/untitled-theatre-company-no-61-and-yara-arts-group-up-the-left-hand-of-darkness-puppet-show>

Chicago Tribune, Theater Loop email opens w/Opening w/Wakka Wakka & Biograph 1.5.26  
No link

Choose Chicago, 30 TTD in January inc CIPTF 1.5.26  
<https://www.choosechicago.com/blog/special-events/30-things-to-do-in-chicago-this-january/>

Third Coast Review, preview by N Bishop 1.8.26  
<https://thirdcoastreview.com/stages/2026/01/08/preview-8th-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival>

Reklama, Festival preview 2 by Sergey Elken posted 12.29.25 cover (?) of January print issue  
<https://thereklama.com/8th-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-chast-ii/>

Puppetry International Research Journal, A D Barriga trade mention 2025 fest 1.10.26  
<https://pirjournal.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2026/01/10/from-the-editor-5/>

Chicago Broadcast Network, Kim Campbell 50+ min podcast w/Sandy & Taylor 1/11/26  
<https://chicagobroadcastingnetwork.com/chicago-international-puppet-festival/>

Daily Herald, Theater Spotlight listing, photos of Rhynoceron & Harlem Doll Palace posted 1.12 in print 1.16.26  
<https://www.dailyherald.com/20260112/theater/spotlight-marriott-revives-little-shop-of-horrors-metropolis-concert-version-of-oliver/>

Newcity, Fest preview hooked to Left Hand of Darkness S Hoyer 1.26 posted 1.13.26  
[https://www.newcitystage.com/2026/01/13/the-complexity-of-the-human-experience-expressed-through-the-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival/?oly\\_enc\\_id=080610481578J0U](https://www.newcitystage.com/2026/01/13/the-complexity-of-the-human-experience-expressed-through-the-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival/?oly_enc_id=080610481578J0U)

Chicago Parent, January TTD inc FNT 1.13.26  
<https://www.chicagoparent.com/things-to-do/free-things-to-do-with-kids-chicago/>

Chicago Parent, Spend a Family Day at CIPTF all ages round up 1.9.26  
<https://www.chicagoparent.com/things-to-do/guides/chicago-puppet-festival-with-kids/>

Chicago Reader, "Chicagoan of Note" Left Hand of Darkness musician Michael Zerang 1.13.26  
<https://chicagoreader.com/music/chicagoans-of-note/michael-zerang-left-hand-darkness-puppet-percussion-drummer-theater-dance/>

Chicago Parent (via Instagram), Companion Spend a Day at CIPTF Insta reel 1.15.26  
<https://www.instagram.com/p/DTiK3cBiWcG/>

Chicago Sun-Times, The Mix TTD in Chicago inc CIPTF posted and in print 1.15.26  
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/things-to-do/2026/01/14/15-things-to-do-this-week-in-chicago-jan-15-21>

WBBM News Radio 789, L Fielding preview interview w/Blair 1.16.26  
No link

Chicago Tribune, Festival preview feature posted 1.16 in print 1.18.26  
<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/01/16/chicago-puppet-festival-2026/>

Cultural Attache (national site), CIPTF included in international Best Bets arts round up 1.18.26  
<https://culturalattache.co/2026/01/19/best-bets-january-19th-january-25th/>

Chicago Sun-Times, Sex Lives of Puppets/Blind Summit preview posted and in print 1.19.26  
<https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment-culture/2026/01/19/sex-lives-of-puppets-blind-summit-chicago-international-puppet-festival>

Rebellious, Top arts/culture events for 2026 leads with CIPTF 1.19.26  
<https://rebelliousmagazine.com/ariana-grande-meryl-streep-margot-robbie-megan-mullally-chicago-2026/>

The Local Tourist, Harlem Doll Palace listing 1.19.26  
[https://thelocaltourist.com/chicago-events-calendar/?\\_evDiscoveryPath=/event/127043v-alva-puppet-theatre-the-harlem-doll-palace](https://thelocaltourist.com/chicago-events-calendar/?_evDiscoveryPath=/event/127043v-alva-puppet-theatre-the-harlem-doll-palace)

ChiiliveShows, Bonnie Kenaz Mara on (only) the 7 shows she'll be reviewing 1.19.26  
<http://chiiliveshows.com/2026/01/the-8th-chicago-international-puppet.html>

Fox32 Good Day Chicago, Blair & Wakka Wakka live, in-studio fest preview, 1.20.26 10:50 a.m.  
<https://www.fox32chicago.com/video/fmc-tn1rp15q8dx8gls5.amp>

Block Club Chicago, festival preview 1.20.26

<https://blockclubchicago.org/2026/01/20/chicagos-8th-annual-international-puppet-theater-festival-boasts-something-for-every-audience/>

Time Out Chicago, festival preview 1.20.26

<https://www.timeout.com/chicago/news/chicago-hosts-a-festival-entirely-dedicated-to-puppetry-and-you-wont-believe-what-it-has-in-store-012026>

Hyde Park Herald, Harlem Doll Palace TTD spotlight w/2025 FNT photo 1.21.26

[https://www.hpherald.com/evening\\_digest/puppet-fest-wine-tasting-and-speed-dating-this-week-s-hyde-park-happenings/article\\_5ed2005a-05aa-4e03-bb4d-f4b3380b564b.html](https://www.hpherald.com/evening_digest/puppet-fest-wine-tasting-and-speed-dating-this-week-s-hyde-park-happenings/article_5ed2005a-05aa-4e03-bb4d-f4b3380b564b.html)

Ben Lalez, realtor and blogger, post top Chicago winter events inc CIPTF 1.21.26

<https://benlalez.com/blog-posts/top-chicago-events-for-the-rest-of-winter-2026/>

ChicagoOnTheCheap, Free events inc CIPTF Puppet Hub 1.21.26

<https://chicagoonthecheap.com/free-black-history-concert-at-auditorium-theatre/>

Broadwayworld, Dodo review by M Davenport 1.22.26

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/chicago/article/Review-DEAD-AS-A-DODO-A-SPELLBINDING-D-ELIGHT-at-Studebaker-Theater-At-The-Fine-Arts-Building-20260122>

Third Coast Review, Your Chicago curated weekend 1.22.26

<https://thirdcoastreview.com/front-page/2026/01/22/your-chicago-curated-weekend-1-22-and-beyond>

Chicago Kids, CIPTF listing 1.22.26

<https://www.chicagokids.com/calendar/Detail/72477/chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival>

Chicago Tribune, What To Do This Weekend inc CIPTF posted 1.22 in print 1.23.26

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/01/22/what-to-do-chicago-jan-24/>

Puppet Happenings, Jim Henson Foundation, first week festival openings 1.23.26

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=6617f6cd35&view=lg&permmsgid=msg-f:1855105119450275686>

ABC7 Chicago, Weekender inc CIPTF D Pathieu 1.23.25

<https://abc7chicago.com/post/festival-friday-weekend-activities-festivals-events/14650731/>

Around The Town Chicago, Dead as a Dodo review J Rath 1.23.25

<https://aroundthetownchicago.com/theatre-reviews/8th-annual-chicago-international-puppet-theater-festival-reviewed-by-julia-w-rath/>

ChiLLMama, Harlem Doll Palace review 1.23.26

<http://chiilliveshows.com/2026/01/review-harlem-doll-palace-at-8th.html>

ChilLMama, Matchbox Shows review 1.23.26

<http://chiilliveshows.com/2026/01/review-laura-heit-matchbox-shows-now.html>

WGN AM 720 Sunday Morning w/Dean Richards, Blair live phone interview 1.25.26 10:45 am FF to 1:05:10 for interview (also CROC at 55:10, no CIPTF mention 1.25.26

<https://wgnradio.com/dean-richards-sunday-morning/dean-richards-sunday-morning-january-25/>

Chicago Tribune, C Jones Theater Loop email CIPTF open, MCinema, no Bio marquee 1.26.26  
No link

Third Coast Review, capsule reviews of week 1 shows 1.26.26

<https://thirdcoastreview.com/stages/2026/01/26/dispatch-international-puppet-theater-festival>

Chicago Tribune, C Jones reviews Manual Cinema 4th Witch Blind Summit SLOP 1.27.26

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/01/27/review-sex-lives-puppets/>

Baird and Warner, Chi real estate firm blog inc CIPTF in 5 TTD 1.28.26

<https://www.bairdwarner.com/blog/2026/01/28/five-things-to-do-in-chicago-jan-30-to-feb-1-2026>

New York Times, L Collins Hughes reviews DHouse, 4thWitch, Rhyno, Buddha posted 1.29.26

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/29/theater/puppet-theater-festival-chicago.html>

WBEZ, audio feature with Manual Cinema by Mike Davis 1.29.26

<https://www.wbez.org/wbez-news/2026/01/29/chicagos-manual-cinema-on-why-puppets-are-such-a-draw-in-digital-age>

3rd Coast Review, Your Curated Weekend includes CIPTF 1.29.26

<https://thirdcoastreview.com/uncategorized/2026/01/29/your-chicago-curated-weekend-1-29-and-beyond>

Newcity, Today In Culture item with gift link to NY Times feature 1.30.26

[https://www.newcity.com/2026/01/30/today-in-culture-friday-january-30-2026-chicago-art-world-protests-ice-james-rondeau-draws-plans-avondales-belmont-tavern-reopens/?oly\\_enc\\_id=579017313467I6J](https://www.newcity.com/2026/01/30/today-in-culture-friday-january-30-2026-chicago-art-world-protests-ice-james-rondeau-draws-plans-avondales-belmont-tavern-reopens/?oly_enc_id=579017313467I6J)

Chicago Tribune, C Jones Theater Loop email notes SLOP review 2.2.26

No link

DePaulia, Manual Cinema feature 2.2.26

<https://depauliaonline.com/81907/artslife/witches-shadows-sight-and-sound-the-puppeteers-of-manual-cinema/>

3rd Coast Review, Week II reviews-SLOP, BUDDHA, CROC, RAM, HOUSE, TRUST reviews 2.3.26

<https://thirdcoastreview.com/stages/2026/02/03/dispatch-puppet-theater-festival-2>

Chicago Stage and Screen, review A Allyn 2.3.26

<https://www.chicagostageandscreen.com/post/8th-annual-puppetfest-warms-the-city>

Reklama, M Gurevich Russian language reviews DODO, HARLEM, RHYNO 2.4.26

<https://thereklama.com/k-8-mu-prishestviyu-kukol-o-kukolnom-arsenale/>

Chicago Tribune, Chris Jones' Marriott Lincolnshire Little Shop of Horrors review leads w/nod to CIPTF posted 2.5 in print 2.6.26

<https://www.chicagotribune.com/2026/02/03/review-little-shop-horrors/?lctg=14AA1471052934FB8455C47C5C>

Chicago Reader, reviews by Kimzyn Campbell (DOLL, WITCH, HARLEM, HOUSE, MATCHBOX, OIL PRESSURE, SLOP) & Rob Silverman Ascher (LEFT HAND, TRUST) 2.9.26

<https://chicagoreader.com/performing-arts/theater/theater-review/sex-sci-fi-ibsen-and-more/>

Puppetry International Research,

<https://pirjournal.commons.gc.cuny.edu/2026/01/10/from-the-editor-5/>

American Theatre, J Pierce Chicago news round up Reader fest coverage blurb & link 2.26.26

<https://www.americantheatre.org/2026/02/26/what-was-caryl-churchill-smoking-and-other-chic-ago-highs/>

## **Partner generated placements**

### ***Enormous Crocodile***

Chicago Tribune, Chris Jones Theater Loop email, EC anct 9.29.25

[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RDKQ6VB1n\\_WZC-3sxifxq4hHK2mxV3Tk/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RDKQ6VB1n_WZC-3sxifxq4hHK2mxV3Tk/view?usp=drive_link)

Broadwayworld, EC anct 9.29.25

<https://www.broadwayworld.com/chicago/article/ROALD-DAHLS-ENORMOUS-CROCODILE-is-Coming-to-the-Studebaker-Theater-20250929>

Buzz Center Stage, EC anct 9.30.25

<https://www.buzznews.net/theatre/upcoming-theatre/item/6020-roald-dahl-s-enormous-crocodile-announced-for-chicago.html>

Classic Chicago Magazine, EC included in Jan events preview 1.1.26

<https://classicchicagomagazine.com/about-the-town-in-january-10/>

KidList, CROC listing, 1/26.26

<https://mykidlist.com/event/roald-dahls-the-enormous-crocodile-the-musical/2026-01-30/1/>

## **Manual Cinema**

Suny Oswego (NY) News, Manual Cinema 4th Witch touring and mentions CIPTF quotes  
NYTimes review 2.6.26

<https://www.oswego.edu/news/story/4th-witch-brings-immersive-theatre-suny-oswego-feb-18>

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, November 3, 2025

Good afternoon. Lots of news today.

The 8th Chicago International Puppet Festival (coming Jan. 21 to Feb. 6, 2026) has announced its lineup. Wakka Wakka, featuring artists from Norway and New York, opens this year's festival with "Dead as a Dodo." It is billed as a "musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and the power of true friendship." Festival favorite Plexus Polaire (of France and Norway) returns with "A Doll's House," a work that brings together puppets, actors, music and video projections for an eerie retelling of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, created by and starring artistic director Yngvild Aspeli. England's Blind Summit ("**The Table**," which was fabulous) returns with "The Sex Lives of Puppets," in which puppets "talk dirty to present a bawdy snapshot of puppet sex in modern-day Britain."

Just what we've been missing.

Chicago's Manual Cinema also will be back with "The 4th Witch," a new and fantastic tale about a girl's nightmarish quest for vengeance inspired by Shakespeare's "Macbeth." Also from Chicago comes "Rhynoceron" by local puppeteer KT Shivak, a piece featuring a life-size rhino puppet that transforms "from a natural inspiring wonder to a hunted object of human greed." France's Théâtre de la Massue makes its debut with two shows by artistic director Ézéquier Garcia-Romeu: "The Little Theater at the End of the World, Opus II," a work that reveals "an extraordinary world of the infinitesimal," and "La Méridienne," a blend of a high-end dinner at a private location with a five-minute puppet show performed for each patron in another room, one at a time.

Add in New York's Alva Puppet Theatre, England's Roald Dahl Story Company, Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre and India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust, among others, and you have got quite the world-class shebang. Full details at [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).

See you at the theater!

— *Chris Jones, chief theater critic*



## CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL Returns This January

World-renowned puppet artists from more than eight countries will converge across Chicago for 12 days of performances, exhibitions, and special events.

By: A.A. Cristl | Nov. 03, 2025



The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival will bring together the world's leading contemporary puppet artists from January 21–February 1, 2026, transforming the city into a stage for imagination, storytelling, and artistry. Tickets go on sale Wednesday, November 12 at 8 a.m. CT.

Spanning 12 days and dozens of venues, the 2026 festival will feature more than 100 puppetry activities, including large-scale spectacles, intimate performances, and late-night cabarets. Chicagoans and visitors can expect a diverse lineup of styles—from bunraku and shadow puppetry to object-based and multimedia works—performed by artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea, Spain, and the United States.

### FESTIVAL HIGHLIGHTS

The 2026 edition opens with *Dead as a Dodo* by Wakka Wakka (Norway/New York), a mesmerizing musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and friendship, commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival.

France and Norway's Plexus Polaire returns with *A Doll's House*, an eerie reimagining of Ibsen's 1879 classic, combining puppets, actors, video projections, and original music under the direction of Yngvild Aspeli.

From England, Blind Summit—known for their breakout hit *The Table*—presents *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, a bawdy, self-aware look at puppet intimacy in modern Britain.

Chicago's own Manual Cinema unveils *The 4th Witch*, a darkly inventive riff on *Macbeth* told through shadow puppetry, silhouettes, and live music performed without dialogue, evoking the feel of a film made in real time.

Local puppeteer and Jeff Award winner KT Shivak presents *Rhynoceron*, a poetic allegory that follows a life-sized rhinoceros puppet as it transforms from majestic creature to hunted symbol of greed.

France's Théâtre de la Massue, led by Ézéquier Garcia-Romeu, makes its festival debut with *The Little Theater at the End of the World*, *Opus II*, a miniature spectacle exploring hidden worlds, and *La Méridienne*, a one-on-one puppet performance paired with a gourmet meal.

New York's Alva Puppet Theatre presents *The Harlem Doll Palace*, inspired by the true story of Harlem educator Lenon Holder Hoyt, whose collection of dolls comes to life to tell their journeys to her museum.

Family audiences can enjoy **Roald Dahl's** *The Enormous Crocodile* by England's **Roald Dahl Story Company**, a musical adventure filled with mischievous humor, jungle escapades, and interplanetary fun.

From Denmark, Sofie Krog Theatre presents *The House*, a comic thriller set in a family-owned funeral home, where intricate puppetry, lighting, and mechanical effects bring hilarious horror to life.

India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust performs *About Ram*, an experimental interpretation of the Ramayana, blending animation, masks, and puppetry to explore themes of dharma and humanity.

Portland-based artist Laura Heit brings *The Matchbox Shows*, miniature puppet performances staged entirely inside matchboxes—what she calls “the smallest, greatest, bravest show in the world.”

From Seoul, South Korea, Geumhyung Jeong presents *Oil Pressure Vibrator*, an audacious adult work that examines the human body, machinery, and desire through mechanical choreography and conceptual puppetry.

New York and Chicago collaborators *Untitled Theater Company No. 61* and *Yara Arts Group* present *The Left Hand of Darkness*, an adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 sci-fi novel, featuring puppetry by Tom Lee and performances by Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab artists.

The festival also welcomes the return of audience favorites *Nasty, Brutish & Short*, a late-night cabaret of experimental short-form puppetry, and the *Free Neighborhood Tour*, which brings free, family-friendly performances from Spain and the U.S. to community spaces throughout the city.

## THE PUPPET HUB AND ADDITIONAL PROGRAMMING

The Puppet Hub, located on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building, will once again serve as the festival's social and creative gathering space. Visitors can enjoy *The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Café*, the *Pop-Up Puppet Shop*, and two free exhibitions: *Two Ways Down*, featuring Laura Heit's animation inspired by **Hieronymus Bosch's** *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, and a display of giant lantern puppets crafted in a pre-festival workshop led by Andrew Kim of *Thingamugig*.

Puppetry enthusiasts can also participate in the **Ellen Van Volkenburg** Symposium, the *Catapult Artist Intensive*, and a range of professional workshops led by visiting artists, offering educational opportunities for performers and designers alike.

## ABOUT THE FESTIVAL

Now presented annually, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is the largest event of its kind in North America. The 2025 edition drew more than 22,000 attendees from across the world, establishing Chicago as a premier destination for contemporary puppetry.

The Warwick Allerton Hotel (701 N. Michigan Ave.) serves as the official festival hotel. Guests can use promo code *Puppetfest2026* for discounted rates during festival dates. Reservations are available at [warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago](http://warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago) or by calling (312) 440-1500.

For tickets, schedules, and information, visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).

# BUZZ CENTER STAGE

Covering Theatre in Chicago Since 2006

November 04, November 2025 1:22P

8TH CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL RETURNS JANUARY 21-FEBRUARY 1, 2026, WELCOMING PUPPETEERS FROM AROUND THE GLOBE TO NORTH AMERICA'S LARGEST PUPPET FEST

Written by Buzz Center Stage



Get set, Chicago, to marvel at incredible stories told through the lens of contemporary puppetry, performed by amazing puppet artists and companies from around the world, during the *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, January 21-February 1, 2026.

Tickets go on sale Wednesday, November 12 at 8 a.m. CT at [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org). Don't wait. Despite Chicago's cold winters, tickets to the *Chicago Puppet Festival* are always the hottest ticket in town come January. Most shows sell out completely.

The 2026 festival will span 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, presenting an international pageant of puppet artists sharing more than 100 puppetry activities. Get your tickets for all-ages spectacle shows in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages, and the always popular, adults-only, late night puppet cabarets. And mark your calendar with a long list of free puppet events and shows happening all over the city throughout the festival.

Warm up to a wildly diverse range of classic and contemporary puppetry styles from around the world, created by puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea and Spain, plus the U.S. and Chicago.

These stories and more await fans of the *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, all told by puppet artists from around the world, showcasing different forms of traditional and contemporary puppet styles, from bunraku-style to shadow puppetry, marionettes to object-based works. Highlights include:

Fan favorite Wakka Wakka, featuring artists from Norway and New York, opens this year's festival with *Dead as a Dodo*, a mesmerizing musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and the power of true friendship. Infused with puppetry, humor, and stunningly innovative visual effects, *Dead as a Dodo*, commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, takes audiences deep into the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, may be shattering the established order of the dead.

Festival favorite Plexus Polaire (France/Norway) returns with *A Doll's House*, a work that brings together puppets, actors, music and video projections for an eerie retelling of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, created by and starring artistic director Yngvild Aspeli.

England's Blind Summit, break-out stars of the inaugural *Chicago Puppet Festival* with *The Table*, returns with *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, in which their beautiful puppets talk dirty to present a bawdy snapshot of puppet sex in modern-day Britain.

Chicago's own shadow puppet masters, Manual Cinema, is back with *The 4th Witch*, a new and fantastic tale about a girl's nightmarish quest for vengeance inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, told through shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music, without dialogue or narration. It's like a film created in real time as you watch, this time in a new wide format.

Also from Chicago comes *Rhynoceron* by local puppeteer and Jeff Award-winning puppet designer KT Shivak, a gem of a piece with numerous stage elements that unfold in clever ways featuring a life-size, life-like rhino puppet that transforms in front of our eyes from a natural inspiring wonder to a hunted object of human greed.

France's Théâtre de la Massue, makes its *Chicago Puppet Festival* debut with two shows by artistic director Ézéquier Garcia-Romeu: *The Little Theater at the End of the World*, *Opus II*, a genre-busting work that reveals an extraordinary world of the infinitesimal, and *La Méridienne*, a unique blend of a high-end dinner at a private location with a five-minute puppet show performed for each patron in another room, one person at a time.

New York's Alva Puppet Theatre presents *The Harlem Doll Palace*, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a beloved public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from Aunt Len's "dollection" as they recreate their journeys to their museum.

Family audiences will love *Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile* by England's Roald Dahl Story Company. In this mischievous musical, based on Dahl's snappy book with toe-tapping tunes, the titular star weaves through the jungle with his tummy rumbling, while other jungle creatures foil his secret plans to stop this greedy brute. Audiences will go from the jungle into outer space and back again, just in time for a wild dance party!

*The House*, a puppet comedy thriller from Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre, is set in a family-owned funeral home, where hilarious horror, twists, turns and jumping souls haunt a revolving set featuring intricate lighting, strange contraptions and scary sound effects.

India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust makes their Chicago debut with *About Ram*, an experimental theatrical piece using excerpts from the Bhavbhuti's "Ramayana," an epic tale and guide for Hindu principles like dharma, told through animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets.

Audiences of all ages will delight in the magic of sequined Portland puppet raconteur Laura Heit's *The Matchbox Shows*, teeny tiny puppet shows performed inside matchboxes, "the smallest, greatest, bravest, show in the world."

From Seoul, South Korea comes *Oil Pressure Vibrator* created by and featuring Geumhyung Jeong, an artist who's interested in the human body, the objects that surround it, with a particularly strange fascination with the excavator. Witness as Jeong plunges a big bucket into preconceptions about sexuality, technology and the body. For adult audiences only.

*The Left Hand of Darkness*, a New York/Chicago creative collaboration between Untitled Theater Co. No. 61 and Yara Arts Group, is based on the 1969 novel by famed sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin. Puppetry and co-direction are by Tom Lee, Co-Director of the Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab, in a show featuring a deep bench of Chicago puppet artists and actors.

2026 also marks the return of the always popular late-night puppet cabarets, *Nasty, Brutish & Short*, and the *Free Neighborhood Tour*, presenting two free, family-friendly puppet shows from Spain and the U.S. at venues and community spaces all over the city throughout the festival.

In addition to the incredible pageant of international and U.S. puppetry artists, The Puppet Hub is back and open throughout the festival on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building. It's the perfect place to relax between shows, meet up with friends, make new ones, and learn more about contemporary puppetry. Attractions include The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Cafe, serving coffee, tea, winter soups and baked treats, the Pop-Up Puppet Shop, and two free exhibits: *Two Ways Down*, featuring festival artist Laura Heit's exquisite hand-drawn animation and film inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Heavenly Delights," and a room full of giant lantern puppets created in the pre-festival workshop with Andrew Kim of Thingamugig.

Puppetry enthusiasts are also welcome to check out the free *Ellen Van Volkenburg Symposium*, the *Catapult Artist Intensive*, professional education workshops with visiting puppet artists, and more.

Now presented annually, the *Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival* is the largest event of its kind in North America. Last year's festival attracted a record audience – more than 22,000 fans of puppetry, ranging from Chicago residents to international guests who choose Chicago as their travel destination in the middle of January to enjoy world-class puppet productions from here and abroad.

The Warwick Allerton Hotel, 701 N. Michigan Ave. in downtown Chicago, is the Official Hotel of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. Use promo code Puppetfest2026 for discounted rates during festival dates. Visit [warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago](http://warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago) or call (312) 440-1500 to reserve.

Visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org) for tickets and information about the *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, and sign up for the festival's e-news. Follow the festival on Facebook, Instagram or Vimeo, hashtag #ChiPuppetFest.

Following are details about this year's performances (in chronological order), special events and exhibits, including venues, dates, times, ticket prices, estimated run time, and show descriptions:

Opening Night Prelude Reception  
Fine Arts Building, 3rd Floor Balcony  
410 S. Michigan Ave., downtown Chicago  
Wednesday, January 21, 5:15 p.m. - 6:45 p.m.  
Tickets: \$125/\$250 benefactor

Join top supporters, festival leadership, staff and artistic directors from this year's international companies to

*full line-up continues...*

# Chicago Parent

## Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival at multiple Chicago venues

JANUARY 21, 2026 - FEBRUARY 01, 2026



### DESCRIPTION

Experience a world of imagination at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, featuring performances by puppet artists from around the globe. Families can enjoy free neighborhood shows and all-ages performances across the city.

Event cost: Prices vary by show; free neighborhood events available

Event times: Jan. 21-Feb. 1, 2026, various times daily

### ADDITIONAL INFORMATION

**Website:** <https://chicagopuppetfest.org/the-2026-festival-lineup-announced/>

**Age recommendation:** Babies, Early Elementary (K-3), Late Elementary (4-5), Preschool, Teens, Toddlers, Tweens

**Neighborhood:** Chicago

## **Today In Culture, Tuesday, November 11, 2025: Auditorium Theatre's Restoration Plans | Loop's Resto Recovery | "Dick Clark's New Year's Rockin' Eve" Adds Chicago**

BY RAY PRIDE | NOVEMBER 11, 2025

### **Puppet Fest Dangles Lineup**

The eighth Chicago International Puppet Festival will take place over twelve days early next year, beginning January 21. Dozens of Chicago venues will host an international pageant of puppet artists sharing more than a hundred puppetry activities, with all-ages spectacles in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages as well as adults-only, late-night puppet cabarets. Free puppet events and shows will happen all over the city throughout the festival as well. Tickets go on sale Wednesday, November 12 [here](#).



## CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL Returns In January

Global puppetry artists will present new works across Chicago January 21–February 1, 2026.

By: A.A. Cristi Nov. 12, 2025



Tickets are now on sale for the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, running January 21–February 1, 2026 and presenting 12 days of contemporary puppetry from around the world.

Produced at venues across the city, the festival will feature more than 100 events, including large-scale productions, smaller experimental works, late-night cabarets, and free neighborhood programming.

Artists and companies will represent England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea, Spain, the U.S., and Chicago, offering a broad spectrum of traditional and contemporary forms, including bunraku-style puppets, shadow work, object-based theater, marionettes, and hybrid performance.

Highlights of the 2026 edition include Wakka Wakka's *Dead as a Dodo*, commissioned by the festival; Plexus Polaire's retelling of *A Doll's House* and its companion work *Trust for me a while*; Blind Summit's new production *The Sex Lives of Puppets*; and Manual Cinema's *The 4th Witch*, created through shadow puppetry, silhouette acting, and live music. Additional works include KT Shivak's *Rhynoceron*; Ézéquier Garcia-Romeu's *The Little Theater at the End of the World*, *Opus II* and *La Méridienne*; Alva Puppet Theatre's *The Harlem Doll Palace*; and multiple family productions, including *The Enormous Crocodile* from the *Roald Dahl* Story Company.

The festival will also present *The House* from Sofie Krog Theatre; *About Ram* by India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust; Laura Heit's miniature *The Matchbox Shows*; *Oil Pressure Vibrato* by Seoul-based artist Geumhyung Jeong; and the world-premiere adaptation of Ursula K. L. Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*, produced by Untitled Theater Co. No. 61 and Yara Arts Group with puppetry direction by Tom Lee.

Alongside ticketed performances, the festival will revive its late-night cabarets *Nasty*, *British & Short* and offer a free Neighborhood Tour featuring accessible events throughout the city. The Puppet Hub at the Fine Arts Building will again serve as a gathering space with exhibitions, workshops, and a pop-up café.

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, now presented annually, is the largest event of its kind in North America. Last year's festival drew more than 22,000 attendees from Chicago and abroad.

[Click Here to Buy Tickets](#)

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, November 17, 2025

Good afternoon.

Busy week! My new reviews include "**Chess**" and "**Oedipus**" on Broadway and the fabulous touring cast of "**Hell's Kitchen**" here in Chicago.

Lots of news, too. "**Jekyll & Hyde**" is announcing its extension right here in this newsletter. The hit Kokandy Productions show now will play through Jan. 10, 2026. Just as well, since the regular run was sold out. I'm told that will be that.

.....

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival has the Chopin Theatre booked and you know how these puppets get if there is a show in their way. Don't wait if you want to see it; tickets will go fast.

.....

See you at the theater!

— *Chris Jones, chief theater critic*

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, December 1, 2025

**Second City**, Monday only, is offering \$25 tickets for all Monday-Thursday shows in January. Use the code DEALS2025. Also, the code CROCGIFT40 will get you 40% off tickets to Roald Dahl's "**The Enormous Crocodile**" at the Studebaker Theater at the Fine Arts Building. Produced by the Dahl estate, this show is also part of the Chicago International Puppet Festival. High hopes here. Finally, a \$30 donation to the **Rivendell Theatre Ensemble** gets you a ticket to a screening of the movie "Ghostlight" on Dec 9 at the Davis Theatre, which stars folks connected to that theater. Free popcorn, too.

Have a great week. I will see you at the theater.

— *Chris Jones, chief theater critic*

## Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Returns in January

The festival will feature a diverse range of classic and contemporary puppetry styles from around the world.

By: Stephi Wild | Dec. 16, 2025



The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is fast approaching, so get set for 12 straight days of incredible stories told by puppet artists and companies from around the world playing all over Chicago, January 21–February 1, 2026.

The festival will feature a diverse range of classic and contemporary puppetry styles from around the world, created by puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea and Spain, plus the U.S. and Chicago.

The 2026 festival spans 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, presenting an international pageant of puppet artists all over the city, plus free shows, exhibits and the always popular Puppet Hub. Get your tickets for all-ages spectacle shows in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages, and the always popular, adults-only, late night puppet cabarets.

Tickets to more than 100 shows, events and interactive workshops are on sale.

These stories and more await fans of the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, showcasing different forms of traditional and contemporary puppet styles, from bunraku-style to shadow puppetry, marionettes to object-based works. Highlights include:

Fan favorite Wakka Wakka, featuring artists from Norway and New York, opens this year's festival with *Dead as a Dodo*, a mesmerizing musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and the power of true friendship. Infused with puppetry, humor, and stunningly innovative visual effects, *Dead as a Dodo*, commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, takes audiences deep into the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, may be shattering the established order of the dead.

Festival favorite Plexus Polaire (France/Norway) returns with *A Doll's House*, a work that brings together puppets, actors, music and video projections for an eerie retelling of **Henrik Ibsen's** 1879 play, created by and starring artistic director Yngvild Aspeli. Plexus Polaire will also perform a second show, *Trust for me a while*, a ventriloquist show gone off the rails that puts an end to depressing contemporary meta-theater and crappy puppeteers.

England's Blind Summit, break-out stars of the inaugural Chicago Puppet Festival with *The Table*, returns with *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, in which their beautiful puppets talk dirty to present a bawdy snapshot of puppet sex in modern-day Britain.

In a late addition to the line-up, festival founder and artistic director Blair Thomas returns to the stage with his original new work *Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?*, a large-scale, four-panel crankie offering insight into the rascally nature of a dog and his owner.

Manual Cinema, Chicago's own shadow puppet masters, is back with *The 4th Witch*, a new and fantastic tale about a girl's nightmarish quest for vengeance inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, told through shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music, without dialogue or narration. It's like a film created in real time as you watch, this time in a new wide format.

Also from Chicago comes *Rhynoceron* by local puppeteer and Jeff Award-winning puppet designer KT Shivak, a gem of a piece with numerous stage elements that unfold in clever ways featuring a life-size, life-like rhino puppet that transforms in front of our eyes from a natural inspiring wonder to a hunted object of human greed.

France's Théâtre de la Massue makes its Chicago Puppet Festival debut with *La Méridienne*, a unique blend of a high-end dinner by Chicago chef at a private location paired with a five-minute puppet show performed by artistic director Ézéquiél Garcia-Romeu for each patron in another room, one person at a time.

New York's Alva Puppet Theatre presents *The Harlem Doll Palace*, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a beloved public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from Aunt Len's "dollection" as they recreate their journeys to their museum.

Family audiences will love **Roald Dahl's** *The Enormous Crocodile* by England's **Roald Dahl** Story Company. In this mischievous musical, based on Dahl's snappy book with toe-tapping tunes, the titular star weaves through the jungle with his tummy rumbling, while other jungle creatures foil his secret plans to stop this greedy brute. Audiences will go from the jungle into outer space and back again, just in time for a wild dance party!

*The House*, a puppet comedy thriller from Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre, is set in a family-owned funeral home, where hilarious horror, twists, turns and jumping souls haunt a revolving set featuring intricate lighting, strange contraptions and scary sound effects.

India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust makes their Chicago debut with *About Ram*, an experimental theatrical piece using excerpts from the Bhavbhuti's "Ramayana," an epic tale and guide for Hindu principles like dharma, told through animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets.

Audiences of all ages will delight in the magic of sequined Portland puppet raconteur Laura Heit's *The Matchbox Shows*, teeny tiny puppet shows performed inside matchboxes, "the smallest, greatest, bravest, show in the world." In addition to seeing Heit perform live, catch *Laura Heit: Short Films*, a showcase of her short films featuring drawing, stop-motion and puppetry, presented in the fest's first-ever collaboration with Chicago's Music Box Theatre.

From Seoul, South Korea comes *Oil Pressure Vibrator* created by and featuring Geumhyung Jeong, an artist who's interested in the human body, the objects that surround it, with a particularly strange fascination with the excavator. Witness as Jeong plunges a big bucket into preconceptions about sexuality, technology and the body. For adult audiences only.

The world premiere of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a New York/Chicago creative collaboration between Untitled Theater Co. No. 61 and Yara Arts Group, is based on the 1969 novel by famed sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin. Puppetry and co-direction are by Tom Lee, Co-Director of the Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab, in a show featuring a deep bench of Chicago puppet artists and actors.

2026 also marks the return of the always popular late-night puppet cabarets, *Nasty, Brutish & Short*, and the *Free Neighborhood Tour*, presenting two free, family-friendly puppet shows from Spain and the U.S. at venues and community spaces all over the city throughout the festival.

In addition to the incredible pageant of international and U.S. puppetry artists, The Puppet Hub is back and open throughout the festival on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building. It's the perfect place to relax between shows, meet up with friends, make new ones, and learn more about contemporary puppetry. Attractions include The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Cafe, serving coffee, tea, winter soups and baked treats, the Pop-Up Puppet Shop, and two free exhibits: *Two Ways Down*, featuring festival artist Laura Heit's exquisite hand-drawn animation and film inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Heavenly Delights," and a room full of giant lantern puppets created in the pre-festival workshop with Andrew Kim of Thingamugig.

Puppetry enthusiasts are also welcome to check out the free [Ellen Van Volkenburg](#) Symposium, the Catapult Artist Intensive, professional education workshops with visiting puppet artists, and more.

Now presented annually, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is the largest event of its kind in North America. Last year's festival attracted a record audience – more than 22,000 fans of puppetry, ranging from Chicago residents to international guests who choose Chicago as their travel destination in the middle of January to enjoy world-class puppet productions from here and abroad.



Photograph: Saverio Truglia, Courtesy of Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

## Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival


Theater, Puppet shows


Various locations throughout Chicago


Jan 21-Feb 1, 2026

Tuesday December 16 2025

### Details

 **Event website:**  
[www.chicagopuppetfest.org/](http://www.chicagopuppetfest.org/)

 **Address**  
Various locations throughout Chicago  
Chicago

 **Price:**  
Ticket events start at \$15

[Directions](#)

### Dates and times

Wed, Jan 21, 2026

Various locations  
throughout  
Chicago

Ticket events  
start at \$15

Thu, Jan 22, 2026

Various locations  
throughout  
Chicago

Ticket events  
start at \$15

## Global puppet artists come to Chicago Jan. 21-Feb. 1 for eighth annual fest

Chicago Star AI; Edited by Amir Farooq Dec 17, 2025 0



Image by JayKellyPR

The eighth Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival will take place from Jan. 21 to Feb. 1, 2026, bringing together puppet artists from across the globe, according to festival organizers. The event will span 12 days across dozens of Chicago venues, featuring more than 100 puppetry activities for audiences of all ages.

Tickets went on sale Nov. 12, with organizers warning that shows typically sell out quickly despite Chicago's cold winters.



Image by JayKellyPR

Chicago's own Manual Cinema presents "The 4th Witch," inspired by Shakespeare's Macbeth, using shadow puppetry and live music without dialogue.



Image by JayKellyPR

## Family shows and special events

Family-friendly productions include Roald Dahl's "The Enormous Crocodile," featuring jungle creatures and puppets in a toe-tapping musical adventure.



Image by JayKellyPR

Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre presents "The House," a comedy thriller set in a funeral home, with revolving sets and special effects.

The festival also includes The Puppet Hub on the Fine Arts Building's fourth floor, offering a café, puppet shop, and free exhibits throughout the event.



Image by JayKellyPR

Late-night puppet cabarets and free neighborhood performances will occur city-wide, with professional development workshops available for practicing artists. Last year's festival attracted over 22,000 attendees to 29 Chicago venues.



Amir Farooq

★ Follow Amir Farooq

# AMERICAN THEATRE

## Seeking: New Chicago Theatre Hangouts

*In this edition of Sightlines, we experience an inaugural WBEZ theatre event, tour TimeLine's newest space in Chicago's Uptown neighborhood, and hear from a rising costume designer.*



By [Jerald Raymond Pierce](#)

## New Year, New Puppets

As we head toward 2026, let's look ahead to the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, set to run [Jan. 21-Feb. 1, 2026](#). The annual festival will span 12 days and dozens of local venues as puppetry artists from around the world descend on the windy city to share their work. Take a look at the teaser below and set your calendars!



## CHICAGO EVENTS CALENDAR



### Alva Puppet Theatre: The Harlem Doll Palace

Jan 22 at 4:00PM - Jan 24 at 7:30PM

Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts

915 E 60th St.  
Chicago  
60637

Occurring on:

Jan 22 at 4:00 PM  
Jan 22 at 7:30 PM  
Jan 23 at 4:00 PM  
Jan 23 at 7:30 PM  
Jan 24 at 6:00 PM

Chicago International Puppet Festival, the Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts, and Theater and Performance Studies at the University of Chicago present: Alva Puppet Theatre: The Harlem Doll Palace

Welcome to The Harlem Doll Palace, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from the “dollection” inside Aunt Len’s Doll and Toy Museum as they recreate their journeys to the museum and seek to keep its beloved founder alive while Harlem deteriorates around her.

Thursday, January 22 at 4 p.m.  
Thursday, January 22 at 7:30 p.m.  
Friday, January 23 at 4 p.m.  
Friday, January 23 at 7:30 p.m.  
Saturday, January 24 at 6 p.m.

Logan Center, Theater East – 915 East 60th Street, Chicago, IL 60637

### About Alva Puppet Theatre

Children inherently trust the world of imagination which connects humans to truth and happiness. Alva Puppet Theatre encourages adults to suspend their attachment to realism, too. Through the intersection of puppetry, material/object, performance, ritual and actor theater, Alva Puppet Theatre’s work reveals the wonderment and cultural impact of historical epochs and characters, while centering narratives around women and the repressed emotional truth of African-American women. The company is led by artistic director and multidisciplinary artist Alva Rogers, who also plays Aunt Len.

### About the Chicago International Puppet Festival

Once Again, Puppetry Takes Center Stage. The 2026 Chicago Puppet Fest will span 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, presenting an international pageant of puppet artists sharing more than 100 puppetry activities. Get ready for spectacular shows in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages, the always popular late night puppet cabarets, and a long list of free puppet events happening all over the city. Shows often sell out so don’t delay! To Learn more visit: <https://chicagopuppetfest.org/>



# THE JIM HENSON FOUNDATION

37-18 Northern Blvd. Suite 400, Long Island City, NY 11101  
[www.hensonfoundation.org](http://www.hensonfoundation.org)

December 26, 2025

## Puppet Happenings Newsletter

### PUPPET HAPPENINGS - TOP PICKS

#### Dead as a Dodo \* - Wakka Wakka

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[The Studebaker Theatre](#) - 410 S Michigan Ave Chicago, IL



**January 21 - 25**

See website for performance times

Dead as a Dodo raucously takes us deep within the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, concerned about disappearing completely, notice something peculiar: the Dodo is miraculously sprouting feathers! A wave of transformation begins, shattering the established order of the dead. The two friends must flee, fighting to stay together as they are drawn into the heart of an epic battle between life and death.

\* Recipient of a Jim Henson Foundation Presenters Grant (2025)

# HYDE PARK HERALD

## A PUPPET FEST PREVIEW

Anne Spiselman, theater critic 21 hrs ago 0



Plexus Polaire's "A Doll's House."

The best show I saw at the first Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in 2015 was "The Table" by England's Blind Summit Theatre. It consisted simply of a rectangular table and a single puppet with a small, rather amorphous cloth body and an oversized cardboard head. Named Moses and operated by three puppeteers, he looked like he could have stepped out of the Bible (from the neck up, anyway) and was curmudgeonly, extremely funny and intensely alive as he commented on everything from his immediate surroundings to his philosophy of life. He blew me away.

A decade later, the eighth annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival running this Jan. 21-Feb. 1 promises to be the most exciting ever. With more than 100 events and programs at dozens of venues, it brings together puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea and Spain, as well as Chicago and the rest of the U.S. Attendance might even top last year's record of 22,000.

Here are some shows not to miss, starting in Hyde Park but otherwise in no particular order. Happily, Blind Summit will be back with a new production I can't wait to see.

*For more information and tickets, visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).*

**"The Harlem Doll Palace"** by Alva Puppet Theatre (New York City/U.S.)

Jan. 22-24 at the Logan Center for the Arts

Join the dolls from the "dollection" inside Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum as they recreate their journeys to the museum and try to keep its beloved founder alive while Harlem deteriorates around her. Based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, a public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone, the show features artistic director Alva Rogers as Aunt Len.

**"Trust Me for a While"** by Plexus Polaire (France/Norway)

Jan. 28-Feb. 1 at the Logan Center for the Arts

Back for its fifth fest — having wowed past audiences with "Dracula: Lucy's Dream," "Moby Dick," "Chambre Noire" and "Cendres" — Plexus Polaire has also added a second production, this one on the South Side. In the horror-comedy "Trust Me for a While," artistic director Yngvild Aspeli explores the fraught relationship between ventriloquists and their dummies while questioning what is real and what is fake.

**"A Doll's House"** by Plexus Polaire (France/Norway)

Jan. 22-24 at DePaul University's Merle Reskin Theatre

Plexus Polaire's main show, Aspeli's eerie take on Henrik Ibsen's 1879 classic, features Nora (played by her) as a prisoner of her own web of lies in a house haunted by hyper-realistic, life-size puppets, dead birds, a possessed female choir and other ghosts created with video projections and music as well as puppets and actors. It invites us to explore our life choices.

**"Happy Birthday, Mon Ami"** by Alex & Olmsted (Baltimore/U.S.)

Feb. 1 at the Experimental Station

As part of the fest's Free Neighborhood Tour, which this year includes two shows touring the city, "Happy Birthday, Mon Ami" uses glove puppetry, live music and audience participation to present the clash of class, cultures and expectations that arise when Jacques' American cousin Sam visits him in Paris for a birthday celebration. Think "Kukla, Fran and Ollie" or "Punch and Judy," only different.

**"Dead as a Dodo"** by Wakka Wakka (Norway/U.S.)

Jan. 21-25 at the Studebaker Theater

In this musical odyssey about survival, transformation and the power of friendship, two skeleton friends in the underworld, a Dodo and a boy, notice something peculiar: the Dodo is miraculously sprouting feathers! When a wave of transformation ensues, shattering the established order of the dead, fear and chaos erupt, and the two must flee, fighting to stay together as they are drawn into the heart of an epic battle between life and death. Back by popular demand, "Dead as a Dodo" showcases stunning visual effects from a nonprofit company that has created 13 original works, frequently in collaboration with others. This is the festival opener, and there's a pre-show reception and a post-show party on opening night.

**"Rhynoceron"** by KT Shivak (Chicago/U.S.)

Jan. 22-25 on the Chopin Theatre Mainstage

A Chicago premiere from a local company, "Rhynoceron" traces the true events surrounding the arrival of a one-horned rhinoceros to Renaissance Europe, sparking an obsession that continued for hundreds of years. Through acts of hunting and collecting, KT Shivak's life-size, lifelike rhino puppet transforms in front of our eyes from a natural wonder to an object of human greed. Created with support from The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, the production premiered last May at New York's Puppetopia 2025, and the realistic puppet was also a star attraction in the recent Chicago Cultural Center exhibit, "Potential Energy: Chicago Puppets Up Close."

**"The 4th Witch"** by Manual Cinema (Chicago/U.S.)

Jan. 22-25 at The Biograph's Začek-McVay Mainstage

Fans of the local performance collective, design studio and film and video production company will be thrilled by its fifth puppet fest outing, which turns elements from Shakespeare's "Macbeth" upside down.

On the eve of an invasion of her small town by the local warlord, Macbeth, a young girl escapes into the forest, where she is rescued by a witch, who adopts her as an apprentice. As the girl becomes more skilled in witchcraft, her grief and rage spark a quest for vengeance against the warlord who killed her parents. Combining shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette, cinematic techniques and live music, "The 4th Witch" explores themes of grief, war, generational conflict and cycles of violence.

**"Nasty, Brutish & Short"** by Rough House Puppet Arts (Chicago/International)

Jan. 23-24 at Constellation

I haven't seen this raucous, raunchy multi-company cabaret, but it is a fest favorite and was named "Best Late-Night Adult-Content Puppet Cabaret" by the Chicago Reader, so it must be fun. It also provides a low-risk environment for artists to perform new and experimental work. This year the cabarets are being streamed live, too.

**"The Sex Lives of Puppets"** by Blind Summit Theatre (England)

Jan. 26-31 at The Biograph's Začek-McVay Mainstage

This collaboration between Blind Summit's puppets and the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles pulls back the covers on puppet sex to expose the filthy, funny, shocking and touching "nuts and bolts" and eroticism in contemporary Britain. Inspired by real-life responses and featuring an array of expressive puppets, it was called "oddly adorable" by the New York Times.

**"Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile"** by the Roald Dahl Story Company (England)

Jan. 29-Feb. 1 (and post-fest until Feb. 21) at the Studebaker Theater

A menagerie of puppet jungle creatures ranging from Trunky the Elephant to Muggle-Wump the Monkey tries to foil the secret plans and clever tricks of the hungry, greedy Enormous Crocodile in the U.S. premiere tour of this U.K. hit musical based on Dahl's book. The music is by Ahmed Abdullahi Gallab, with a book and lyrics by Suhayla El-Bushra, and additional music and lyrics by Tom Brady.

**"The House"** by Sofie Krog Theatre (Denmark)

Jan. 29-Feb. 1 at Steppenwolf's Merle Reskin Space

Two puppeteers lead audiences behind closed doors and into rooms that hide unspeakably dark deeds in this puppet comedy thriller about the Warehouse Family Funeral Home whose undertaker changes her will on her deathbed. The complex performance unfolds in a revolving set featuring intricate lighting, strange contraptions and scary sound effects – the perfect setting for hilarious horror, twists and turns and jumping souls.

**"About Ram"** by Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust (India)

Jan. 29-31 at the Dance Center of Columbia College

This experimental theater piece, created with support from the India Foundation for the Arts and in collaboration with animator Vishal Dar and master puppeteer S.Chidambara Rao, uses excerpts from the Bhavbhuti's "Ramayana" told through animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets. The ancient Indian epic focuses on Prince Ram, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, who is exiled and must fight the demon king Ravana to rescue his wife Sita. It serves as a guide to Hindu principles like dharma, exploring themes of good versus evil, ideal relationships and duty.

**"The Matchbox Shows"** by Laura Heit (Portland/U.S.)

Jan. 22-25 at Constellation

All the world is a matchbox in Laura Heit's miniature cabaret where she performs teeny, tiny puppet shows about a dead boyfriend, a sausage fairy, a tiger whisperer, a perfectionist, a bath-loving ghost and many others. The miniature stages come to life with crankies, fire and pop-up paper engineering. Fortunately, the puppet shows are simultaneously projected on a screen behind her table, making the details larger than life.

**Closing Party**

Feb. 1 at The Rhapsody Theater

Festival favorite Joshua Holden and his right-hand man, the charmingly misanthropic Mr. Nicholas, co-emcee this final evening of puppetry spotlighting "Cowboy Outlaw" performed by artistic director and festival founder Blair Thomas and Silas Thomas, "What to Do in a Puppet Emergency" by Blind Summit's Mark Down and surprises.

## 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. Part I

ALL THE DOLLS ARE WELCOME TO VISIT US

👤 Sergey Elkin 📄 Poster



A scene from the play "Dead as a Dodo." Photo by Richard Terminus

*As always, the Chicago theater year begins with the Puppet Festival. 2026 will be no exception. From January 21st to February 1st, the city will host the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival—North America's largest showcase of puppetry. For twelve days, Chicago will become the puppet capital of the world. The 2026 festival features theater companies from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea, and Spain, along with leading puppet companies from Chicago and other US cities. The program includes life-size puppet theaters, tiny puppet theaters, puppet pantomime and animation theaters, sand paintings and objects, productions with elements of drama and puppet theater, cabaret theaters, and much, much more. In total, over one hundred performances will be performed at various venues in Chicago and the suburbs. Here's a brief guide to the festival. Part I. I'll start with the international guests. (At the request of readers, I indicate the duration of the performances and age restrictions.)*

January 21, 7:00 pm; January 23, 7:30 pm; January 24, 2:00 pm and 7:30 pm; January 25, 2:00 pm. The opening performance of the festival is "**Dead as a Dodo**" by the theatre company Wakka Wakka (Norway/USA).

Deep in the underworld, Dodo and Neanderthal dig up fresh bones. Their ancient skeletal forms are rapidly deteriorating, and they fear extinction. One day, a strange occurrence disrupts their daily routine—Dodo miraculously sprouts a new bone! A whirlwind of transformations upends the order established for millennia... A fantastical glimpse into the future, harking back to the distant past. The performance was commissioned by the Puppet Festival in collaboration with Nordland Visual Theater.

Wakka Wakka Productions ([wakkowakka.org](http://wakkowakka.org)) is a non-profit theatre company based in New York City and Oslo. The company is led by Kirjan Waage and Gwendolyn Warnock. Since 2001, the company has created thirteen original productions, which it has toured internationally. The company's productions utilize physical theatre and incorporate elements of puppetry. The company's track record includes collaborations with the Oslo Philharmonic Orchestra, Riksteatret, and the Animando and MiNensemble studios. Wakka Wakka has won a Drama Desk Award, an Obie Award, and two UNIMA Citations of Excellence. At the VI Festival in 2024, Wakka Wakka debuted with the world premiere of the trilogy "Animalia Trilogy," the second part of which was the play "Dead as a Dodo." In addition, we saw the performances "The Immortal Jellyfish Girl" and "Animal RIOT".

Before the performance on January 21st, there will be an Opening Night Prelude Reception at 5:15 PM, followed by an Opening Night Post-Show Party at 8:30 PM. Separate tickets are required for the opening ceremony and party. "Dead as a Dodo" runs 80 minutes and is open to audiences ages eight and up. For more information, visit [www.wakkowakka.org/dead-as-a-dodo](http://www.wakkowakka.org/dead-as-a-dodo). Studebaker Theatre (410 S Michigan Ave., Fine Arts Building, Chicago, IL 60605).

January 22-28, 4:00, 6:30, and 9:00 pm. Théâtre de la Massue from Nice, France, presents "La Méridienne," a gourmet dinner and puppet show. Chicago has never seen anything like it! It begins with twelve guests taking their seats in a building in Wicker Park (the exact seat will be announced after purchasing a ticket). Guests enjoy dinner, then, one by one, each guest is taken to another room to watch a puppet show presented just for them. "La Méridienne" is a story about the fragility of human thought in the face of time. An invisible puppeteer will show us the history of humanity—birth, life, and disappearance in the universe—as if in a dream, in just five minutes. It remains to be added that the dinner is prepared by Chef Chris Sullivan. The owner of Twilight Kitchen, the former chef of Ikram Cafe, he has extensive experience working in top Chicago restaurants, including Blackbird and Avec.

The Théâtre de la Massue was founded in 1985 by director Ezequiel García-Romeu. Since 2012, the theater has been located in Nice. García-Romeu has long and successfully explored new forms of puppet and marionette theater. His productions have been presented at the Charleville-Mézières Universal Festival, the National Theatre of Nice, the Théâtre National de Chaillot, the Odéon Theatre, the Théâtre de la Commune, the Auditorium of the Musée d'Orsay, the Avignon Festival, the Berlin Festival of Theatre Arts, and many other festivals.

"La Méridienne" runs for 60 minutes (it's not entirely clear how you can have dinner and see the show in that time, but that's what the program says). Audiences 18 and up are welcome. For more information, visit [ezequiel-garcia-romeu.com/en/la-meridienne/](http://ezequiel-garcia-romeu.com/en/la-meridienne/). Various locations in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood.

January 22-24, 6:00 pm. The now traditional fifth (!) meeting with the Plexus Polaire Theatre (France-Norway). This time, there are two performances. The first is "A Doll's House" based on the play by Henrik Ibsen. The director and starring actor is the theater's artistic director, Ingvild Aspeli. Life-size puppets, live actors, dead birds, music, video projections, a female choir... everything is mixed in this strange doll house in the play "A Doll's House," where Nora and other characters from the world classic of drama, Henrik Ibsen, live. The performance lasts 80 minutes, and is open to audiences aged 13 and up. Details are available at [www.plexuspolaire.com](http://www.plexuspolaire.com). DePaul's Merle Reskin Theatre (60 E Balbo Dr, Chicago, IL 60604).



A scene from the play "A Doll's House." Photo by Johan Karlsson

January 28th and 29th, 5:30 and 8:00 pm; January 31st, 2:00 pm. Plexus Polaire Theatre presents "Trust Me for a While." A curious and rather tense "duel" unfolds between an unsuccessful magician and his professional puppeteer partner. In this gripping "horror comedy," director Ingvild Aspeli explores his fascination with a ventriloquist dummy. The performance, replete with wild antics, asks the audience relevant questions: what in our world is real and what is fake, and what happens when reality vacillates between these two poles?

Plexus Polaire is familiar to us from four performances at previous festivals. The first was the tragicomedy "Ashes" ("Cendres") at the Second Festival in 2017—the story of a young man who sets houses on fire and the story of a writer who, decades later, uses this as literary material. At the Fourth Festival in 2019, we saw the "wild hallucination" (as the performance's genre was described) "Chambre Noire" about feminist Valerie Solanas, who shot Andy Warhol in 1968. After being shot three times at point-blank range, Solanas walked outside, approached a police officer, and said, "I shot Andy Warhol." Warhol experienced clinical death, underwent five hours of surgery, and survived. In 2023, the opening of the Fifth Festival featured a production of "Moby Dick," based on Herman Melville's epic novel "Moby Dick," or, The White Whale. The performance featured seven actors, fifty puppets, a life-size whale, and... an octobass (the largest (approximately four meters tall) and lowest-pitched bowed instrument). Last year, the Seventh Festival hosted the Chicago premiere of "Dracula: Lucy's Dream," a large-scale spectacle in which Lucy, a life-size puppet, tells the story of Count Dracula, based on Bram Stoker's novel. Lucy wrestles with her inner demon ("the Dracula in all of us") and attempts to harness, or at least control, it.

The performance "Trust Me for a Moment" runs 45 minutes and is open to audiences ages 15 and up. For more information, visit [plexuspolaire.com/une-maison-de-poupe](http://plexuspolaire.com/une-maison-de-poupe). Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts, Performance Hall (915 E 60th St, Chicago, IL 60637).

January 26–28, 7:30 pm; January 29, 5:00 pm; January 30, 5:00 and 8:00 pm; January 31, 4:00 and 8:00 pm. London's Blind Summit Theatre presents "The Sex Lives of Puppets." Co-written and directed by Ben Keaton and the theatre's artistic director, Mark Down.



A scene from the play "The Sex Lives of Dolls." Photo by Charlie Lyne

The English troupe Blind Summit was the star of the First Puppet Festival 2015. Their unforgettable production of "The Table," featuring a cardboard puppet and a table, was a resounding success. True to its title, the table stood center stage, and throughout the performance, the puppet Moses, controlled by three puppeteers (who are also the show's creators), interacted with us. Moses spoke, cried, laughed, argued with God, and addressed the puppeteers. Sometimes hilariously funny, sometimes incredibly sad. The production won First Prize at the 2011 Fringe International Theatre Festival in Edinburgh.

Eleven years later, the theater returns to Chicago with a production in which puppets of varying sizes humorously and movingly portray a turbulent and, as the synopsis puts it, "obscene" portrait of doll sex in contemporary Britain. The New York Times deemed the production "charming," and The Stage called it "a positive message about sharing intimacy, letting go of inhibitions, and finding joy in it."

London's Blind Summit Theatre is one of the world's leading puppet theaters. Founded in 1997 by Mark Downe and Nick Barnes. A former doctor, Downe became fascinated with theater, earned a second degree in acting, and conceived a new form of theater. He is the author, director, and performer. His friend Nick Barnes interned at the Philippe Genty International Puppet Institute. Barnes creates puppets for many theater companies, including Blind Summit. The puppets are made in the style of Japanese Bunraku theater, but are designed for Western audiences. Blind Summit Theatre creates puppet shows of all sizes, including the giant puppets for the 2012 London Olympics Opening Ceremony.

"The Sex Lives of Puppets" runs 101 minutes with an intermission. Ages 18 and up are welcome. For more information, visit [blindsommit.com/whats-on/the-sex-lives-of-puppets](http://blindsommit.com/whats-on/the-sex-lives-of-puppets). The Biograph's Začec-McVay Mainstage (2433 N Lincoln Ave, Chicago, IL 60614).

January 29, 1:00 pm; January 30, 10:30 am and 6:00 pm; January 31, 11:00 am and 4:00 pm; February 1, 10:00 am and 1:00 pm (performances will continue after the end of the festival). Roald Dahl Story Company from England presents the musical "The **Enormous Crocodile**" based on the book by Roald Dahl. Directed by Emily Lim. The performance is a collaboration with Regent's Park Open Air Theatre and Leeds Playhouse. A huge crocodile makes its way through the jungle, frightening everyone with its warlike appearance. Only other inhabitants of the jungle can thwart its secret plans and cunning tricks. They will have to show a lot of courage to stop the bloodthirsty beast. The play features charming characters including Trunky the elephant and Muggle-Wampa the monkey. This British hit will be performing as part of the theater's premiere tour across the United States.

"Enormous Crocodile" runs for 55 minutes and is open to audiences of all ages. For more information, visit [enormouscrocodilemusical.com](http://enormouscrocodilemusical.com). Studebaker Theatre.



A scene from the play "The Enormous Crocodile." Photo by Danny Caan

January 29, 6:00 and 8:30 pm; January 30, 6:00 and 9:00 pm; January 31, 2:00 and 6:00 pm; February 1, 2:00 pm. Sofie Krog Theatre from Denmark presents the play "The **House**". The play tells the story of the Warehouse Family Funeral Home. On her deathbed, an undertaker changes the dying woman's last will and testament. After her death, the secret begins to unravel, and a villainous plan is born. The performance unfolds on a revolving set with tricky lighting and frightening sound effects—the perfect backdrop for a comedy thriller.



A scene from the play "Home." Photo by Sofie Krog Theatre

The Sofie Krog Theatre is one of Denmark's leading puppet theaters. It was founded in 2003 by artist and puppet maker Sofie Krog. In 2009, set designer David Faraco joined the theater. The theater tours throughout Europe and has received numerous awards for its productions. The performance "The House" is 55 minutes long and is open to audiences ages 13 and up. For more information, visit [sofiekrog.com/the-house](http://sofiekrog.com/the-house) . Steppenwolf's Merle Reskin Space (1624 N Halsted St, Chicago, IL 60614).

January 29, 7:30 pm; January 30, 1:00 and 6:00 pm; January 31, 12:00 pm. Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust from India will make its Chicago debut with the play " About **Ram** ," an experimental production based on the ancient Indian epic Ramayana. Episodes from the book about Prince Rama, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, who was forced to fight the demon Ravana to save his wife Sita, are told through animation, dance, mask theater, and, of course, puppets. The play was created with the support of the India Foundation for the Arts in collaboration with animator Vishal Dar and puppet master Chidambara Rao. Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust was founded in India in 1998 as the Association of Puppet Theater Artists. The title is derived from two Hindi words: "kat" – tree (from "katputli" – puppet theater) and "katha" – story. The performance "About Rama" lasts 60 minutes and is open to audiences ages 5 and up. For more information, visit [katkatha.org](http://katkatha.org) . Dance Center of Columbia College (1306 S Michigan Ave, Chicago, IL 60605).

January 30, 9:00 pm; January 31, 2:00 pm. One-woman show " Oil Pressure **Vibrator** " by South Korean artist Geumhyung Jeong. She examines the human body and its surrounding objects from a sexual perspective. Her performance intertwines documentary footage and video projections. The performance is 60 minutes long and is open to audiences ages 18 and up. For more information, visit [geumhyungjeong.com](http://geumhyungjeong.com) . Chopin Theatre (1543 W Division St, Chicago, IL 60642).

January 22 – February 1. The Free Neighborhood Tour runs throughout the festival in various Chicago neighborhoods. This year, puppeteers from Spain and Baltimore (USA) will perform two free shows.

January 22-25. The performance " **Stone by Stone** " by Spanish artist Tian Gombau. One day, while walking barefoot along the beach, he suddenly realized that there were a great many stones on Earth. He began collecting and keeping them like precious treasures. The result was an original, touching performance using only inanimate objects. In 1992, Gombau founded the Tian Gombau-Teatre de l'Home Dibuxat company. He has staged more than ten performances, performed in more than forty countries on four continents in ten languages. The performance "Stone by Stone" has been performed almost two thousand times worldwide, received seventeen national and international awards, and was nominated for a MAX AWARDS (Spain) in the category "Best Performance for Children and Family Viewing." The performance lasts 30 minutes, and audiences of all ages are invited. For more details, visit [hondibuizal.com/en](http://hondibuizal.com/en) .

January 28 – February 1. The Alex & Olmsted Theatre Company from Baltimore, Maryland, presents the play " Happy **Birthday** , Mon Ami." American Sam comes to Paris for his French brother Jacques's birthday... We'll experience witty sketches about the cultural (and other) differences between France and America. The play combines puppetry, where characters come to life with a few hand movements, live music, and audience participation. The result, as the play's synopsis describes, is "a delightful hour of fun for the whole family." Broadway World called the production "exquisite."

This is our second time meeting with the Alex and Olmsted company. At the Sixth Festival in 2024, the troupe presented the play "MAROONED! A Space Comedy" about an astronaut's crash landing on an uncharted planet eighty-seven thousand light years away.

Alex and Olmsted is a theater company named after its founders, Alex Vernon and Sarah Olmsted Thomas. The troupe has toured cities across the United States and participated in international theater festivals in Italy, Denmark, South Korea, and Canada.

The performance "Happy Birthday, My Friend" runs for 60 minutes and is open to audiences of all ages. For more information, visit [alexandolmstead.com](http://alexandolmstead.com) .

From guests from other countries to guests from other cities in the USA.

January 22, 7:30 pm; January 23, 8:30 pm; January 24, 3:00 and 8:30 pm; January 25, 3:00 and 6:00 pm. Emmy Award-winning Chicago theater company Manual Cinema presents the play "The **4th Witch** ." As is well known, in Verdi's "Macbeth," three witches predict Macbeth's future as king, but chaos ensues and he dies. The puppet "The Fourth Witch" alludes to the opera only in its title, but the entire play is built on allusions to Shakespeare's tragedy. The play begins with the invasion of a small town by the local military leader Macbeth. A girl, whose parents were killed by Macbeth's warriors, flees into the forest, where she is found, rescued, and taken as an apprentice by a witch. As the girl—the "fourth witch"—becomes increasingly skilled in the arts of witchcraft, she devises a plan for revenge. She is certain she will find and avenge Macbeth for the death of her parents... The story is told through puppets, shadow puppetry, and live music, without dialogue or narration.

Manual Cinema was founded in 2010 by five enthusiasts: Drew Dear, Sarah Forneys, Ben Kauffman, Julia Miller, and Kyle Wegter. The troupe tours internationally, combining shadow theater, visual projection, innovative sound, and excellent music. The troupe's productions are well-known, having performed five of them at the past seven festivals. At the Fifth Festival in 2023, we saw the puppet version of "Frankenstein," and at the Seventh Festival in 2025, we saw "Leonardo! A Wonderful Show About a Terrible Monster," a dramatization of two popular children's books by American writer and animator Mo Willems, one of the creators of "Sesame Street." And in December, for the third year in a row (it's already a tradition!), Manual Cinema will present its interpretation of Dickens's famous Christmas story, "Manual Cinema's Christmas Carol." The performance, "The Fourth Witch," runs 65 minutes and is open to audiences ages 12 and up. For more information, visit [manualcinema.com/work/the-4th-witch](http://manualcinema.com/work/the-4th-witch) .

The Biograph's Začek-McVay Mainstage.

January 22-24, 8:00 and 10:00 pm; January 25, 8:00 pm. Laura Haight of Portland, Oregon, presents "The Matchbox **Shows** ." The entire puppet show takes place inside matchboxes, leading many to call it "the smallest show in the world." Haight's miniature circus world features strongwoman Ruby, magician Donna and her magic banana, pirate Bill and his seven flying chairs, a fire-breathing dragon, and a brave rabbit—all no bigger than a matchstick. The show is projected onto a screen behind the table, so you won't miss a single detail.

Laura Heit is an artist, animator, performer, and experimental filmmaker. Her work has been shown in numerous cities across the United States and Europe. She received her Master of Fine Arts degree from the Royal College of Art in London and her Bachelor of Fine Arts degree from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. "Matchbox Shows" is a 50-minute performance, open to audiences ages 13 and up. For more information, visit [lauraheit.com/the-matchbox-shows](http://lauraheit.com/the-matchbox-shows) . Constellation (3111 N Western Ave, Chicago, IL 60618).

That's not all about the festival. More next time.

*Nota bene!* For more information and tickets to the International Puppet Theatre Festival, visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org) .



## 8th Chicago Intl Puppet Theater Fest to present puppeteers from around the globe



the DuSable.  
DIVISION OF SPECIAL INTERESTS CENTER  
A Smithsonian Affiliate

The *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival* is fast approaching, so get set for 12 straight days of incredible stories told by puppet artists and companies from around the world playing all over Chicago, January 21-February 1, 2026.

Warm up to a wildly diverse range of classic and contemporary puppetry styles from around the world, created by puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South

Korea and Spain, plus the U.S. and Chicago.

The 2026 festival spans 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, presenting an international pageant of puppet artists all over the city, plus free shows, exhibits and the always popular Puppet Hub. Get your tickets for all-ages spectacle shows in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages, and the always popular, adults-only, late night puppet cabarets.

Tickets to more than 100 shows, events and interactive workshops are on sale at [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org). Don't wait. Despite Chicago's cold winters, tickets to the *Chicago Puppet Festival* are always the hottest ticket in town come January. In fact, some shows are already sold out.

These stories and more await fans of the *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, showcasing different forms of traditional and contemporary puppet styles, from bunraku-style to shadow puppetry, marionettes to object-based works. Highlights include:

Fan favorite Wakka Wakka, featuring artists from Norway and New York, opens this year's festival with *Dead as a Dodo*, a mesmerizing musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and the power of true friendship. Infused with puppetry, humor, and stunningly innovative visual effects, *Dead as a Dodo*, commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, takes audiences deep into the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, may be shattering the established order of the dead.

Festival favorite Plexus Polaire (France/Norway) returns with *A Doll's House*, a work that brings together puppets, actors, music and video projections for an eerie retelling of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, created by and starring artistic director Yngvild Aspeli. Plexus Polaire will also perform a second show, *Trust for me a while*, a ventriloquist show gone off the rails that puts an end to depressing contemporary meta-theater and crappy puppeteers.

England's Blind Summit, break-out stars of the inaugural *Chicago Puppet Festival* with *The Table*, returns with *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, in which their beautiful puppets talk dirty to present a bawdy snapshot of puppet sex in modern-day Britain.

In a late addition to the line-up, festival founder and artistic director Blair Thomas returns to the stage with his original new work *Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?*, a large-scale, four-panel crankie offering insight into the rascally nature of a dog and his owner.

Manual Cinema, Chicago's own shadow puppet masters, is back with *The 4th Witch*, a new and fantastic tale about a girl's nightmarish quest for vengeance inspired by Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, told through shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music, without dialogue or narration. It's like a film created in real time as you watch, this time in a new wide format.

Also from Chicago comes *Rhynoceron* by local puppeteer and Jeff Award-winning puppet designer KT Shivak, a gem of a piece with numerous stage elements that unfold in clever ways featuring a life-size, life-like rhino puppet that transforms in front of our eyes from a natural inspiring wonder to a hunted object of human greed.

France's Théâtre de la Massue makes its *Chicago Puppet Festival* debut with *La Méridienne*, a unique blend of a high-end dinner by Chicago chef at a private location paired with a five-minute puppet show performed by artistic director Ézéquier Garcia-Romeu for each patron in another room, one person at a time.

New York's Alva Puppet Theatre presents *The Harlem Doll Palace*, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a beloved public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from Aunt Len's "dollection" as they recreate their journeys to their museum.

Family audiences will love *Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile* by England's Roald Dahl Story Company. In this mischievous musical, based on Dahl's snappy book with toe-tapping tunes, the titular star weaves through the jungle with his tummy rumbling, while other jungle creatures foil his secret plans to stop this greedy brute. Audiences will go from the jungle into outer space and back again, just in time for a wild dance party!

*The House*, a puppet comedy thriller from Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre, is set in a family-owned funeral home, where hilarious horror, twists, turns and jumping souls haunt a revolving set featuring intricate lighting, strange contraptions and scary sound effects.

India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust makes their Chicago debut with *About Ram*, an experimental theatrical piece using excerpts from the Bhavbhuti's "Ramayana," an epic tale and guide for Hindu principles like dharma, told through animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets.

Audiences of all ages will delight in the magic of sequined Portland puppet raconteur Laura Heit's *The Matchbox Shows*, teeny tiny puppet shows performed inside matchboxes, "the smallest, greatest, bravest, show in the world." In addition to seeing Heit perform live, catch *Laura Heit: Short Films*, a showcase of her short films featuring drawing, stop-motion and puppetry, presented in the fest's first-ever collaboration with Chicago's Music Box Theatre.

From Seoul, South Korea comes *Oil Pressure Vibrator* created by and featuring Geumhyung Jeong, an artist who's interested in the human body, the objects that surround it, with a particularly strange fascination with the excavator. Witness as Jeong plunges a big bucket into preconceptions about sexuality, technology and the body. For adult audiences only.

The world premiere of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, a New York/Chicago creative collaboration between Untitled Theater Co. No. 61 and Yara Arts Group, is based on the 1969 novel by famed sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin. Puppetry and co-direction are by Tom Lee, Co-Director of the Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab, in a show featuring a deep bench of Chicago puppet artists and actors.

2026 also marks the return of the always popular late-night puppet cabarets, *Nasty, Brutish & Short*, and the *Free Neighborhood Tour*, presenting two free, family-friendly puppet shows from Spain and the U.S. at venues and community spaces all over the city throughout the festival.

In addition to the incredible pageant of international and U.S. puppetry artists, The Puppet Hub is back and open throughout the festival on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building. It's the perfect place to relax between shows, meet up with friends, make new ones, and learn more about contemporary puppetry. Attractions include The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Cafe, serving coffee, tea, winter soups and baked treats, the Pop-Up Puppet Shop, and two free exhibits: *Two Ways Down*, featuring festival artist Laura Heit's exquisite hand-drawn animation and film inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Heavenly Delights," and a room full of giant lantern puppets created in the pre-festival workshop with Andrew Kim of Thingamugig.

Puppetry enthusiasts are also welcome to check out the free *Ellen Van Volkenburg Symposium*, the *Catapult Artist Intensive*, professional education workshops with visiting puppet artists, and more.

Now presented annually, the *Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival* is the largest event of its kind in North America. Last year's festival attracted a record audience – more than 22,000 fans of puppetry, ranging from Chicago residents to international guests who choose Chicago as their travel destination in the middle of January to enjoy world-class puppet productions from here and abroad.

The Warwick Allerton Hotel, 701 N. Michigan Ave. in downtown Chicago, is the Official Hotel of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. Use promo code Puppetfest2026 for discounted rates during festival dates. Visit [warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago](http://warwickhotels.com/warwick-allerton-chicago) or call (312) 440-1500 to reserve.

Visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org) for tickets and information about the *8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, and sign up for the festival's e-news. Follow the festival on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [Vimeo](#), hashtag #ChiPuppetFest.

**Following are updated details about this year's performances (in chronological order), special events and exhibits, including venues, dates, times, ticket prices, estimated run time, and show descriptions:**



**Opening Night Prelude Reception**

**Fine Arts Building, 3rd Floor Balcony**

**410 S. Michigan Ave., downtown Chicago**

**Wednesday, January 21, 5:15 p.m. - 6:45 p.m.**

**Tickets: \$125/\$250 benefactor**

Join top supporters, festival leadership, staff and artistic directors from this year's international companies to

*Full schedule continues...*

# AGENDA

Top 10 reasons to fill up your calendar this month

By WEB BEHRENS



## A LONG WINTER'S TRAP

Chug some coffee before you **Settle In** with Siskel Center's annual series of marathon films. This year's lineup includes the French tetralogy *Tales of the Four Seasons* and the seven-hour Russian Oscar winner *War and Peace*. Jan. 3–31. [siskelfilmcenter.org](http://siskelfilmcenter.org)

## PRESTIDIGITATION POWER

Muran Purcell, a sleight-of-hand master with 10 Theater and Second City training, begins a Chicago Magic Lounge residency with *Magic Is People*. Jan. 7–Mar. 25. [chicagomagiclounge.com](http://chicagomagiclounge.com)

## JAZZMATAZZ

Local pianist Julian Davis leads his chosen Few, performs with his own ensemble, the multidisciplinary Circle of Trust. Jan. 14. [constellation-chicago.com](http://constellation-chicago.com)



## STRINGS TOGETHER

Nova Linea Musica delivers its latest world premiere in *Threads of Melodic Silence*, featuring a piece for a violin-cello-piano trio by local composer Stacy Garrop. Jan. 21. [novalineamusica.org](http://novalineamusica.org)



# 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

## PUPPET STATES

This year's **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival** includes adults-only fare such as England's *The Sex Lives of Puppets* and South Korea's *Oil Pressure Vibrator*. Jan. 21–Feb. 1. [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org)



## DOUBLE EXPOSURE

The *Living With Modernism* exhibition juxtaposes Edward Weston's black-and-white photos of the 1930s West with Chicagoan Kelli Connell's 21st-century recreations. Jan. 24–Apr. 27. [elmhurstmuseum.org](http://elmhurstmuseum.org)

## YOU MAKE FIGHTING FUN

The 2024 Tony winner *Stereophonic* follows a '70s band that looks a lot like Fleetwood Mac in its tumultuous *Rumours* era. Jan. 27–Feb. 8. [broadwayinchicago.com](http://broadwayinchicago.com)

## CULTURE BLITZ

Author-journalist **Chuck Klosterman** appears at the Music Box to chat about *Football*, his new book about how the sport shapes American life. Jan. 28. [musicboxtheatre.com](http://musicboxtheatre.com)



## SPAR QUALITY

Not every Broadway star can spill the tea as zestfully as they belt a tune. Outspoken three-time Tony winner **Patti LuPone** sure can. Jan. 31. [auditoriumtheatre.org](http://auditoriumtheatre.org)

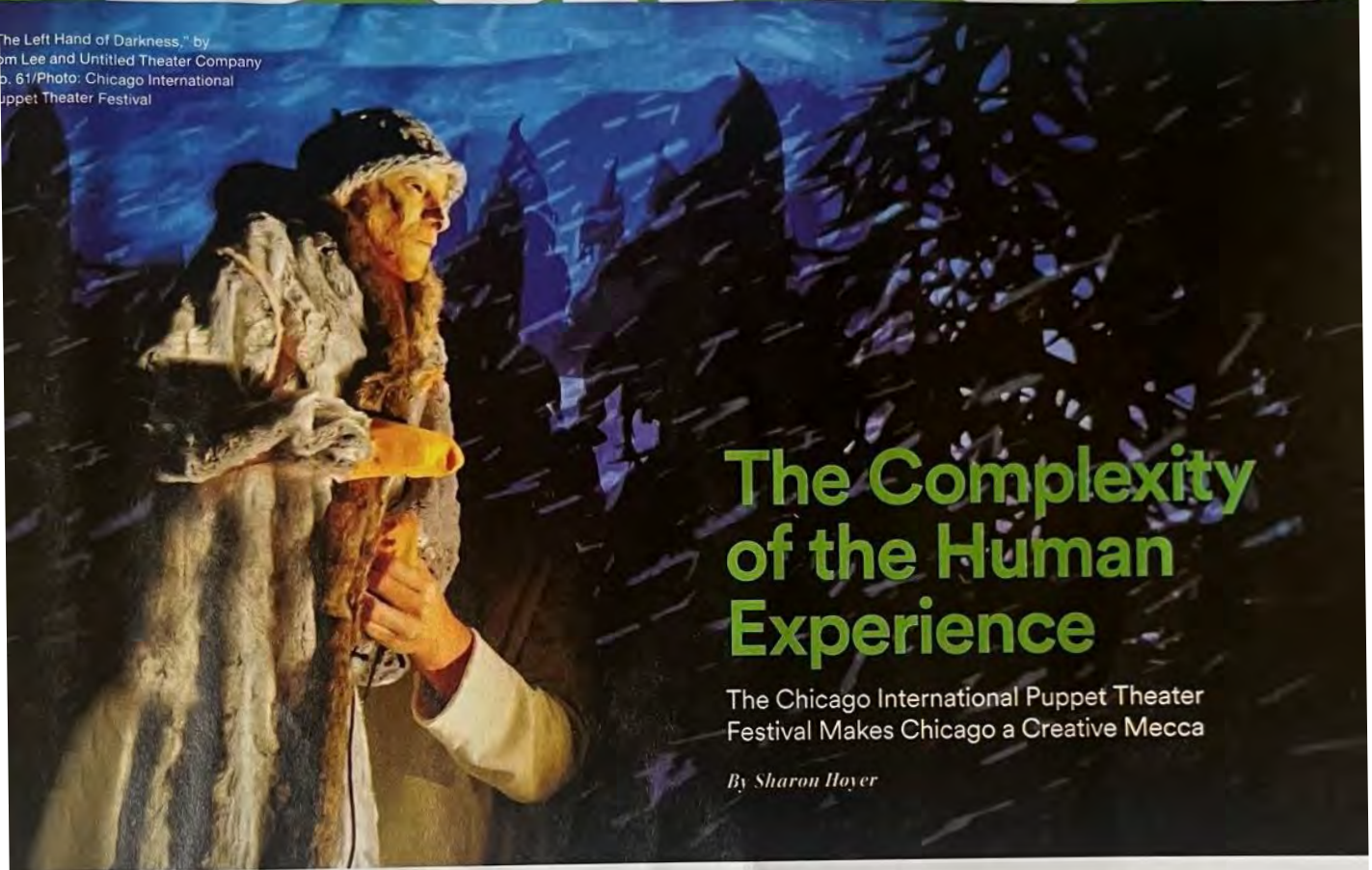


## ROMANCE LANGUAGE

Goodman artistic director emeritus Robert Falls returns home to direct *Holiday*, an update of the Hepburn-Grant screwball comedy. Jan. 31–Mar. 1. [goodmantheatre.org](http://goodmantheatre.org)

# Dance

"The Left Hand of Darkness," by Ursula K. Le Guin, by Tom Lee and Untitled Theater Company No. 61/Photo: Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival



## The Complexity of the Human Experience

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Makes Chicago a Creative Mecca

By Sharon Hoyer

**Tom Lee is a masterful bunraku artist and one of the leading forces that has transformed Chicago into a world destination for puppetry.** Alongside Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival founder and impresario Blair Thomas, Lee created and co-directs the Chicago Puppet Lab, an incubator for new work by local artists. He and Thomas also co-direct the Chicago Puppet Studio, where Lee works as a designer, fabricator and coach.

The fruits of their efforts, and the wizardry of puppeteers from around the globe, will be on display citywide January 21-February 1, when the annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival wows sold-out crowds for the eighth time, at dozens of venues. Though less than a decade old, the Festival has become the largest of its kind on the continent, making Chicago an unlikely creative mecca during one

of its cruelest months. The unpredictable weather can be a boon for hearty puppetry fans, however; one year my friends and I got a private performance as reward for being the only souls to brave the trek downtown in a massive snowstorm.

One of this year's festival highlights is an adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel "The Left Hand of Darkness," in which a man from Earth visits a planet inhabited by people who live most of their lives without specified genders. The show, four years in the making, was created by Lee and directed by Edward Einhorn of New York-based Untitled Theater Company No. 61—a specialist in absurdist theater and one of Lee's longtime collaborators. I spoke with Lee about his new work, why puppets are well-suited to express the complexity of the human experience, as well as the festival overall.

**Why were you drawn to this story for a puppet show?**

This piece is a real passion project for myself and other people involved in it. Ursula Le Guin is a total groundbreaker in her position as a science-fiction writer in the time she was coming up, and the depth and integrity of the ideas she was exploring through the science-fiction lens. Her work is about us as human beings. Before there was a Hogwarts, she created the Earthsea series about how a magician is trained. The parallel with the Harry Potter writer is distinct because "Left Hand of Darkness" in 1969 is addressing this potentiality of the human being that Le Guin, a white woman, saw in many people, and tried to express in this story as a way of thinking about how we present to people, how people view us. It's so ahead of its time in terms of these issues that we now know

are really present in our society and dividing in our society.

I'd worked with Edward Einhorn in New York for nearly fifteen years. He had adapted Le Guin's novels into stage plays, including "The Lathe of Heaven," for Untitled Theater Company No. 61. In the process of doing that, he flew to Portland and met Ursula Le Guin and they spent the day together. They discussed "The Left Hand of Darkness" and, in that discussion Edward tells me, Ursula herself brought up the idea that puppets might be the most effective way to tell that story. A puppet is inherently genderless. All of its identity is created by the projection of the audience on an inanimate object through the work of the puppeteers. In this work that explores a planet where everyone is in a fluid gender state until it's time to be with another, she said puppets might be a way to do this.

When Edward said this story might be it, I said, "Where do I sign up?" Most of the design team is based in Chicago and came into my orbit from working with the festival.

**Would you like to talk about the Chicago artists, from Michael Zerang making the music to the many puppeteers involved?**

Michael is such a treasure and when we were thinking about who could create music for this alien world, he was at the top of the list. He's a fascinating person because of the way he approaches music and sound. He's composing the piece but is also working as a sound designer. He came up with a list of every sound we hear on this alien planet, from music to sounds of nature.

Foremost in the design company are Jacky Kelsey, the costume and hair designer who has influenced a lot of the aesthetics of the piece. When I first approached them, they were super-excited because the novel is considered for many queer people a primal text. The other person who has been with Edward and I from the start is Grace Needleman, who has a long history with the puppetry scene and is pursuing her scenic-design degree. They were instrumental in creating this alien world. And helping talk about what the text and performance means for folks living with a gender-fluid identity. I'm a straight man, but I love that we have a diverse, amazing group of collaborators from all walks of life.

"The Left Hand of Darkness" is a complex novel. It's not what you would think of as a rip-roaring page-turner. Le Guin is working from a place of deep anthropological sense,

building a society with rules and mores that the main character has to navigate. It's infused with elements of Taoist philosophy and a thinking approach to what it means to be different. For one thing, on this planet of people who are not a specific gender, the person who arrives defines themselves as a human male, and so they're viewed as the strange one in this world and trapped with his perspective on people he's met through his life. He often describes people appearing to him in a gender he prescribes to them, but they're free of that. At the end of the novel, he is able to bridge the gap.

**The political climate here has changed a lot since you began working on this show four years ago, increasingly hostile toward people who don't identify in gender binaries. Have those shifts informed the way you and your collaborators approached this piece?**

In this period it's more important than ever. Especially when it's the expressed policy of our government and funding organizations for it not to appear. I grew up in the theater and always worked with people who don't necessarily fit into easy categorizations. Life is very complicated and human existence is a spectrum and tapestry of experiences, states of being, emotions, genders. Even in my own experience, though I am a heterosexual man, I've been open enough to see these currents run. Honestly, it's been so difficult to fund this piece. First of all, it's very ambitious, but also harder because of edicts from above. But it feels even more necessary to do it now.

**Is there anything else you'd like to mention?**

Just to say that if you know puppetry a little bit, there's so much. And if you don't know anything about puppetry, there is so much. It's an art form that has such a vast storytelling potential. Our piece is a text-based adaptation. You can see other pieces that are completely movement-based, where the story is told through the movement of the object. It's endlessly fascinating to me because it can be what you want it to be. I'm so turned on by people who see their first puppet show and get excited and want to see more.

*The Eighth Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, January 21-February 1 at dozens of venues across the city. Tickets and info at [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).*

# CITY CAST

# Chicago

Fast forward to 4:25 – 6:20 for CIPTF8 conversation

JANUARY 2, 2026

## Your Guide to January 2026 in Chicago



Listen on  
Apple Podcasts



Listen on  
Spotify



Watch on  
Youtube



Get the  
RSS Feed

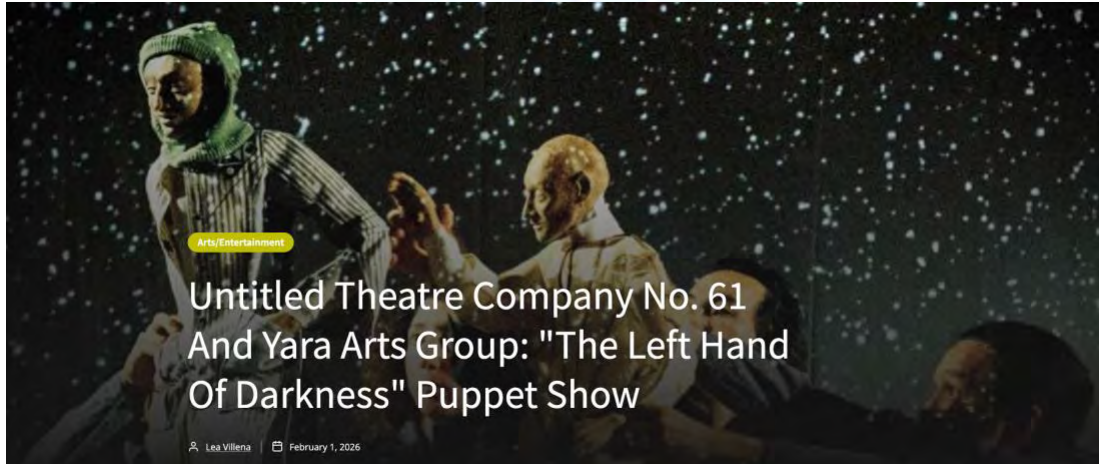
Happy New Year! We're getting 2026 started right with a guide to what's happening in January, from how to celebrate **Martin Luther King Day** to how to make the most of **Restaurant Week**. Host Jacoby Cochran, executive producer Simone Alicea, and social media manager Rick Homuth are here with all the tips you need.

If you're new here, welcome! We've put together a **starter pack for you**, with episodes and articles to welcome you to the City Cast Chicago community.

For even more tips on how to make the most of December in Chicago, **check out Hey Chicago's take** on what to do this month.

City Cast Chicago's guide to December is made possible by our sponsor, **Simply Eloped**. City Cast Chicago is also powered by our members, who enjoy an ad-free version of the show. **Find out more about how to become a member of City Cast Chicago.**

Interested in advertising with City Cast? Find more info [HERE](#)



Event Date: **Thursday, January 29 at 7:30 p.m. | Friday, January 30 at 4 p.m. & 8 p.m. | Saturday, January 31 at 4 p.m. & 8 p.m. | Sunday, February 1 at 1 p.m. & 6 p.m.**



### ***World Premier!***

**The Left Hand of Darkness** is a new work based on the 1969 novel by famed sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin, wherein a lone human emissary to an alien world tries to facilitate inclusion in a growing intergalactic civilization. To do so he must bridge the gulf between his own views and those of the newly encountered, completely dissimilar culture whose inhabitants spend most of their time without a gender. The adaptation was written and co-directed by Edward Einhorn, Artistic Director of UTC61. Puppetry and co-direction are by Tom Lee, Co-Director of the Chicago Puppet Studio and Chicago Puppet Lab, both divisions of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival.

## **BUY YOUR TICKETS NOW**

### **Location:**

Northwestern University's Wirtz Center Chicago Abbott Hall (710 N Lake Shore Dr, Chicago, IL 60611)

[More Info \(External Link\)](#)

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, January 5, 2026

Good afternoon! Welcome to 2026 on a Chicago stage!

First, a reminder that the **Chicago International Puppet Festival** will soon be underway. The first show is Jan. 21 at the Studebaker Theater with the Norwegian-American company Wakka Wakka. The Fest is also presenting this year at the under-utilized Biograph Theatre, huzzah, among many other venues. Audiences totalling 25,000 are expected.

See you at the theater!

— *Chris Jones, chief theater critic*



CHICAGO LIKE A LOCAL BLOG | in **BLOG, SPECIAL EVENTS**

# 50+ things to do in Chicago this January

Last updated on **January 5, 2026** by **Choose Chicago**

New year, plenty of new things to do in Chicago. January may bring chillier temps, but there's still tons happening indoors and outdoors throughout the city, including some of the year's most anticipated dining events and cultural celebrations. Here are just a few of the highlights:

- Enjoy the last of the holiday lights, including [ZooLights](#) and [Lightscape](#)
- Snag a table for a bucket-list restaurant during [Chicago Restaurant Week](#)
- Catch one-of-a-kind theatre productions, from [classic musicals](#) to mesmerizing [live puppetry](#).
- See a new museum exhibit, like an upcoming showcase on an [Oscar-winning costume designer](#)

Check out even more things things to do in Chicago this January 2026 and mark your calendars for a jam-packed [winter in Chicago](#):

## Top events in Chicago this January

[Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival](#) (Jan. 21 - Feb. 1): Celebrate the unique art of puppetry during this annual showcase highlighting both national and international puppet performers.

# Chicago Parent

## Plan a family day at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

Experience the magic of puppetry at the Chicago Puppet Fest with family shows, exhibits and creative performances!



By Sarah Knieff January 9, 2026

Share



Photo credit: Walter Wlodarczyk

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival — Jan. 21-Feb. 1, 2026 — is a magical experience that transforms the Windy City into a vibrant hub of creativity, imagination and playful performances.

The image shows an Instagram post from the account 'chippuppetfest' (Chicago, Illinois). The post features a promotional graphic for the 'CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL' held from 'JAN 21 - FEB 1, 2026'. The graphic includes the text 'TICKETS ON SALE!' in a green circle and a photograph of a puppet character with a human-like face and a lion's mane, wearing a patterned dress and black boots. The Instagram interface shows 389 likes and a comment field.

This festival, celebrating the art of puppetry, invites families to explore the enchanting world behind the curtain. The fest spans 12 days and dozens of venues, presenting an international pageant of puppetry, sharing more than 100 activities.

If you're planning to attend with kids, here's a comprehensive guide to ensure a memorable experience filled with laughter, learning and lots of inspiration.

## Check Out The Free Neighborhood Tour



*Photo courtesy of Poncill Creación (2025)*

The fest's [Free Neighborhood Tour](#) presents two family-friendly puppet shows from Spain and Baltimore at venues and community spaces all over the city. Children will delight in the stories and master puppetry. Plan to arrive 15-20 minutes early to ensure great seats.

### The shows include:

#### "Stone by Stone" by Tiam Gombau

Tiam Gombau begins to collect stones, keeping them as precious treasures. He realizes that what is inside is more than just a stone, resulting in an endearing, 30-minute imagination-waking experience for children.

### Dates and locations:

- **4 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 22**  
Theatre Y, 3611 W. Cermak Road (North Lawndale)
- **11 a.m. Friday, Jan. 23**  
Instituto Cervantes, W. Ohio St. (River North)
- **4:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 23**  
Marshall Field Garden Apartments/Art on Sedgwick, 1406 N. Sedgwick St. (Old Town)
- **4 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 24**  
Segundo Ruiz Belvis Cultural Center, 4048 W. Armitage Ave. (Hermosa)
- **2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 25**  
345 Gallery, 345 N. Kedzie Ave. (East Garfield Park)

## “Happy Birthday, Mon Ami” by Alex and Olmsted

When Jacques' American cousin Sam visits him in Paris for a birthday celebration, cultures, class and expectations clash. This performance combines live music, glove puppetry and audience participation for an hour of family-friendly fun.

### Dates and locations:

- **6 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 28**  
Center on Halsted/Hohn Baran Hall, 3656 N. Halsted St. (Lakeview)
- **4 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29**  
Tuley Park, 501 E. 90<sup>th</sup> (Chesterfield)
- **4:30 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30**  
Loyola Park Fieldhouse, 1230 W. Greenleaf Ave. (Rogers Park)
- **1 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 31**  
Austin Town Hall Cultural Center, 5610 W. Lake St. (Austin)
- **11 a.m. Sunday, Feb. 1**  
Experimental Station, 6100 S. Blackstone Ave. (Woodlawn)

## Explore the Puppet Hub + Exhibitions

In addition to the family-friendly puppet shows, the Puppet Hub will be open during the festival and is the perfect place to relax between shows, get a bite to eat, browse the Puppet Shop and explore the on-site exhibitions.

The Hub opens Jan. 23 and is located within the Fine Arts Building (410 S. Michigan Ave., Studio 433) at the Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Café. The hub opens every day at 9 a.m. and closes when the café closes.

### Exhibitions include:

- **“Two Ways Down” by Laura Heit:** An immersive shadow puppet and hand-drawn animated installation by Laura Heit.
- **Giant Puppet Lanterns:** Giant lantern puppets created by Andrew Kim.

## Catch a Live Puppet Performance



*Photo courtesy of Sandglass Theatre (2025)*

The festival also offers an abundance of ticketed live performances, spanning across multiple days and locations.

Several shows are kid-friendly, including the ones listed below, however, some are not. Be sure to check the festival's website for age restrictions and other important information.

#### "Wakka Wakka: Dead as a Dodo"

**7 p.m. Wednesday, Jan. 12; 7:30 p.m. Friday, Jan 23; 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 24; 2 p.m. Sunday, Jan. 25**

- **Address:** The Studebaker Theater in the Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave.
- **Cost:** \$48/\$40 students and seniors
- **Ages:** 8 and up
- **Running time:** 80 minutes

Two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a bird, notice something peculiar: the Dodo is sprouting feathers. As a wave of transformation begins, the two friends must fight to stay together as they are drawn into an epic battle between life and death.

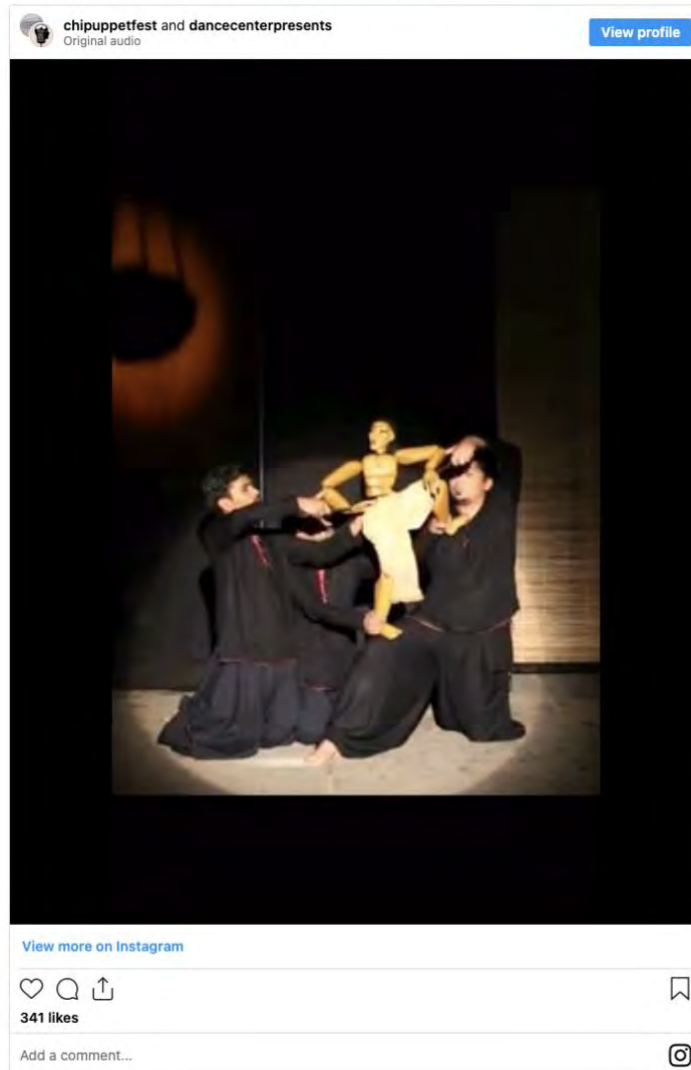
#### The Roald Dahl Story Company: "Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile"

**1 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29; 10:30 a.m. and 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30; 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. Saturday, Jan. 31; 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 1**

- **Location:** The Studebaker Theater in the Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave.
- **Cost:** \$48/\$40 students & seniors—20% discount for groups of 8 or more
- **Ages:** All ages
- **Running Time:** 60 minutes (no intermission)

Based on Roald Dahl's snappy book, the Enormous Crocodile is mischievous and loves to eat. The other jungle animals will have to foil his secret plans and clever tricks to stop him.

## Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust: "About Ram"



7:30 p.m. Thursday, Jan. 29; 1 p.m. and 6 p.m. Friday, Jan. 30; noon Saturday, Jan. 31

- **Location:** Dance Center of Columbia College, 1306 S. Michigan Ave.
- **Cost:** \$35/\$15 students & seniors/ \$15 Columbia College Students
- **Ages:** 5 and up
- **Running Time:** 60 minutes

"About Ram" is told through animation, digitally projected dance, puppets and masks. Prince Ram, an incarnation of the god Vishnu, is exiled and must fight the demon king Ravana to rescue his wife Sita. Experience an epic tale, exploring themes of good versus evil, ideal relationships and duty.

## 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. Часть II

ВСЕ КУКЛЫ В ГОСТИ К НАМ

Сергей Элькин    Афиша



Основатель и руководитель фестиваля Блэр Томас с куклой. Фото - Саверио Тралья

*Театральный год в Чикаго начинается с Кукольного фестиваля: с 21 января по 1 февраля в городе пройдет Восьмой международный фестиваль кукольных театров (8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival) – крупнейший в Северной Америке смотр достижений кукольного искусства. В прошлом номере я подробно рассказал о международных гостях фестиваля. Сегодня – вторая часть путеводителя. (По просьбе читателей я указываю длительность спектаклей и возрастные ограничения.)*

25 января, 8.00 pm; 26 января, 2.00, 5.00 и 8.00 pm. Основатель и художественный руководитель Кукольного фестиваля Блэр Томас (о нем – ниже) представляет спектакль **“Обладает ли собака природой Будды?”** (“Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?”) об озорном характере собаки и ее хозяина. В спектакле звучит музыка чикагского квартета саксофонистов Nois. Представление открывается номером “Ковбой-разбойник”, исполняемым вместе с Сайласом Томасом. Спектакль длится 45 минут, приглашаются зрители всех возрастов. Chopin Theater (1543 W Division St, Chicago, IL 60642).

29 января, 7.30 pm; 30 и 31 января, 4.00 и 8.00 pm; 1 февраля, 1.00 и 6.00 pm. Untitled Theater Company No. 61 (Нью-Йорк), Yara Arts Group (Нью-Йорк) и Том Ли представляют мировую премьеру – спектакль **“Левая рука тьмы”** (“The Left Hand of Darkness”) по роману американской писательницы Урсулы Ле Гуин. Одинокий посланник человечества оказывается в инопланетном мире и пытается наладить связь с межгалактической цивилизацией... В спектакле участвуют чикагские кукольные художники и актеры. Нью-йоркская театральная компания Untitled Theatre Company № 61 отмечает тридцатилетие со дня образования. Все эти годы компания ставит музыкальные спектакли с использованием кукол, компьютерных технологий и физического театра. Один из создателей спектакля – соруководитель Чикагской кукольной студии и кукольной лаборатории Том Ли. Спектакль длится 2 часа с антрактом, приглашаются зрители от 16 лет и старше. Подробности – на сайтах [untitledtheatre.com](http://untitledtheatre.com), [www.yaraartsgroup.net](http://www.yaraartsgroup.net), [tomleeprojects.com](http://tomleeprojects.com). Northwestern University's Wirtz Center Chicago Abbott Hall (710 N Lake Shore Dr, Chicago, IL 60611).



Сцена из спектакля "Левая рука тьмы". Фото — Зак Сан

23-24, 30-31 января, 10.30 pm. **"Nasty, Brutish & Short."** Как и на прошлых фестивалях, на выходных открывает свои двери кукольное кабаре! Артисты разных школ и направлений собираются после спектаклей, чтобы встретиться друг с другом, поиграть, подшутиться... Они исполняют скетчи, импровизируют и наслаждаются жизнью, а мы смотрим на них и радуемся вместе с ними. Весь вечер на арене — ведущий Джеймсон и его пушистые друзья. Организатор вечеров — Rough House Puppet Arts. Кабаре длится 60 минут, приглашаются зрители от 16 лет и старше. Все вечера будут транслироваться в прямом эфире на YouTube-канале. Подробности — на сайте [roughhousetheater.com/nbs](http://roughhousetheater.com/nbs). Constellation (3111 N Western Ave, Chicago, IL 60618).



Сцена из кабаре "Nasty, Brutish & Short". Фото — courtesy Rough House Puppet Arts

24-25, 31 января и 1 февраля, 10.00 am. **Ellen Van Volkenburg Puppetry Symposium.** Ставшие уже традиционными встречи и беседы с артистами и режиссерами о планах и направлениях развития кукольного театра. Симпозиум называется в честь режиссера Эллен Ван Волкенбург (о ней — ниже). Билеты не требуются, вход свободный. Панельные дискуссии будут транслироваться на онлайн-платформе HowlRound. Fine Arts Building (410 S. Michigan Ave., Little Studio, 7th Floor). Подробности — на сайте [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).

Закрытие фестиваля (Closing Party) состоится 1 февраля в 6.30 pm в помещении The Rhapsody Theater (1328 W Morse Ave, Chicago, IL 60626). В представлении примут участие основатель и художественный руководитель фестиваля Блэр Томас, а также Сайлас Томас и Марк Даун из театра Blind Summit. Сведущие вечера — любимец фестиваля Джошуа Холден и его правая рука, обаятельный мизантроп мистер Николас. Приглашаются зрители от 18 лет и старше. The Rhapsody Theater (1328 W Morse Ave, Chicago, IL 60626).

Штаб-квартирой и центром встреч артистов, критиков и всех “сочувствующих”, как и в прошлые годы, станет The Puppet Hub (Chicago’s Fine Arts Building). Если окажетесь там, поднимитесь на старейшем в Чикаго лифте с ручным управлением на четвертый этаж, зайдите в “The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Cafe”, где подают супы, кофе, чай и вкусную выпечку в уютной “кукольной” атмосфере, а также загляните в магазин (Pop-Up Puppet Shop). В течение всех дней (21 января — 1 февраля) в The Puppet Hub открыты две бесплатные выставки: “Two Ways Down” Лауры Хейт с анимацией и фильмом по картине “Сад земных наслаждений” И.Босха, и Giant Puppet Lanterns с гигантскими куклами-фонарями, созданными Эндрю Кимом (Thingamugig Theatre).

В Америке многие считают Чикаго родиной современного кукольного театра. В самом деле, до 1912 года в английском языке даже не существовало такого термина — “кукловод”. В том году в историческом Fine Arts Building на Мичиган авеню открылся Маленький театр (Little Theater of Chicago). Для спектакля “Сон в летнюю ночь” режиссер Эллен Ван Волкенбург хотела использовать кукол-марионеток. Тут-то и выяснилось, что никто из актеров не знает, что такое марионетка. Тогда кукольных артистов называли “шоуменами”, их работа была связана, в основном, с цирковыми аттракционами. Именно Ван Волкенбург впервые использовала слово “кукловод” применительно к театру кукол.

Основатель и бессменный художественный руководитель Кукольного фестиваля Блэр Томас любит кукольный театр с детства. В десять лет он создал в своем родном Джексонвилле (штат Алабама) первую кукольную труппу The Palace Puppeteers и на протяжении трех лет выступал с ней в церквях и школах. С 1989 до 1998 годы он был художественным руководителем чикагского Redmoon Theater, в 2002 году основал собственную фирму “Blair Thomas & Co.”. Томас преподает кукольное искусство в Школе при Арт-институте Чикаго. Он участвовал в создании кукол для спектаклей Lookingglass Theatre “Mr. and Mrs. Pennyworth” и “The Steadfast Tin Soldier”, для спектакля “Волшебная флейта” в Лирик-опере Чикаго (симпатичный дракон — его рук дело).

Восемь лет назад Блэр Томас говорил: “Мне бы хотелось видеть Чикаго в качестве лидера возрождения древнего искусства кукольного театра. Наш город хорошо известен особым интересом публики к театру. Зрители не только посещают спектакли, но и поддерживают новые формы развития искусства. Надеюсь, они не останутся в стороне и от кукол”.

Инаугурационный фестиваль 2015 года прошел при переполненных залах. На восьмидесяти трех спектаклях побывали более четырнадцать тысяч зрителей. Еще больший успех сопутствовал фестивалям 2017 и 2019 годов. С 2022 года фестиваль проходит ежегодно. В прошлом году фестиваль побил все рекорды посещаемости: более двадцати двух тысяч зрителей! Предстоящий фестиваль, похоже, побьет и этот рекорд.

Не пропустите уникальную возможность увидеть все лучшее, что есть сегодня в кукольном театре. Встретимся на фестивале, штаб-квартира которого находится в том самом Fine Arts Building на Мичиган-авеню, где больше ста лет назад началась история кукольного театра в Америке.

*Nota bene! Подробная информация и билеты на спектакли Международного фестиваля театров кукол — на сайте [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).*

# CHICAGO BROADCASTING NETWORK

— chicao lifestyle podcast & video blog —

## CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET FESTIVAL



### Chicago International Puppet Festival

by Chicago Broadcasting Network



5:25 | 49:50



podomatic



Follow me



There will be 100 puppet-based events over 12 days in Chicago this January from the [Chicago International Puppet Fest](#) running January 21st to February 1st 2026.

This festival has quickly (over 8 editions) become a favorite for theater-goers, and Chicagoans are grateful for having something to look forward to other than flus and blizzards. Out of towners who visit for the festival are usually gobsmacked by Chicago's cultural offerings during the darkest time of year, and as one of the few international theater festivals Chicago hosts, it's no surprise that it has become wildly popular, with many shows selling out quickly.

This year, several regional puppet companies have decided to run adjacent and complimentary programming featuring Chicago-based puppeteers offering shows and puppet slams for folks who may have jumped too late and encountered sold out festival tickets, or who cannot afford festival ticket prices. (See below for a partial listing of these shows.)

The Chicago International Puppetfest is the brainchild of Blair Thomas, artistic director & festival founder. I've interviewed Blair a few times over the years as the festival has grown (links) but this time around I spoke to Sandy Smith Gerding (Executive Director) and Taylor Bibat (Festival Coordinator & Director of Education) about what to expect this January when the puppets take over the city, how the Fest is working to reach a wider audience in Chicago and trying to keep the local puppet-show going community looped in to the events while providing a diverse sampling of puppetry styles from around the world. Tune in as we dig deep into the programming and the fest philosophy.

Besides the festival, there are other January Puppet & Puppet Adjacent Stuff to See:

January 15-17 The Uncanny Attic Chapters E-H, Steppenwolf Theatre

January 17 Clowntown Playground -YOLO Fundraiser for Albany Park Mutual Aid 9:30 PM – 3 AM, follow @clowntown.playground for more details

January 25th Stop Motion Plant, exact dates/times TB follow @stopmotionplant

January 26th Rust Belt, award winning show from Theatre Nobody, exact dates/time TBA @xtheatrenobodyx

February 1 Pooky Puppet Slam , location TBA, @pookiepuppets

This is a wonderful interview conducted by Chicago Broadcasting Network contributor Kim Campbell with guests Sandy Smith Gerding, executive director of the Chicago International Puppet Festival and Taylor Bibat, the festival coordinator and Director of education.

I urge you to [listen](#), not only, for details of the 2026 festival events but also interesting tidbits about the art of puppetry and the world of puppetry as a creative art form.



## Spotlight: Marriott revives 'Little Shop of Horrors' while Metropolis stages a concert version of 'Oliver!'



Barbara Vitello

Posted January 12, 2026 10:41 am



Alva Puppet Theatre from New York City performs "The Harlem Doll Palace," about public school art teacher Lenon Holder Hoyt, who created a doll museum in her Harlem home, during Chicago's 8th International Puppet Theater Festival. *Courtesy of Richard Termine*



"Rhinoceron," a play about the arrival of a one-horned rhinoceros to Renaissance Europe designed and directed by KT Shivak, has its Chicago premiere this month during the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. *Courtesy of Richard Termine*

### Chicago celebrates puppet theater

Theater lovers will enjoy 12 days of amazing puppetry during the eighth **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival**, which showcases puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea, Spain and the United States. Among them are noted Chicago puppet designers Blair Thomas and KT Shivak, along with the acclaimed Manual Cinema.

Wednesday, Jan. 21, through Feb. 1 at Chicago venues including: The Studebaker Theater, Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave.; the Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts, East Theater, University of Chicago, 915 E. 60th St.; the Merle Reskin Theatre, 60 E. Balbo Drive; Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division St.; Constellation, 3111 N. Western Ave.; the The Biograph's Theatre, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.; Steppenwolf Theatre, 1624 N. Halsted St.; and others. \$15-\$125. See [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org) for the performance schedule.

## Michael Zerang, percussionist and accompanist

*"There are all sorts of insights I gathered by working with dance and theater, puppet theater—insights I could bring into my music."*

by Philip Montoro  
January 13, 2026



Michael Zerang plays his percussion rig at a rehearsal of *The Left Hand of Darkness* on Wednesday, December 17.  
Credit: Philip Montoro

Born in Chicago in 1958, [Michael Zerang](#) began his career as a percussionist in the late 1970s. He estimates he's given five thousand performances since then, touring at least 40 countries.

As part of what he calls his "art activism," Zerang produced hundreds of concerts at [Links Hall](#) and [Club Lower Links](#) (1985-'89), [Urbus Orbis](#) (1994-'96), and his own Albany Park space, the [Candlestick Maker](#) (2001-'05). The range covered by his bookings—jazz, traditional ethnic folk, abstract free improvisation, electronic music—mirrors the range of his own output.

Zerang has built an ever-expanding network of international artists, and he maintains long-term partnerships with the likes of drummer [Hamid Drake](#), cellist [Fred Lonberg-Holm](#), and bassist [Kent Kessler](#). All three were among his bandmates in the [Peter Brötzmann Chicago Tentet](#).

Kessler and Zerang, who've been playing together since their teens, joined a Tentet offshoot quartet with Brötzmann and Joe McPhee, two masters a generation older. And Zerang says he's played more than 500 gigs with Lonberg-Holm, including in the *Friction Brothers* with Michael Colligan and in the trio *Survival Unit III* with McPhee.

Of the many groups that have shaped Zerang's development, one of the most important was the long-running *Liof Munimula*, formed in 1981 with Daniel Scanlan (electric guitar, violin, cornet) and Don Meckley (shortwave radio, invented instruments). They played together so steadily and for so long that even when their sui generis sound fell into recognizable patterns, they could climb out of them to reinvent it.

Zerang's current band is Puzzle House, with *Azita Youssefi* on saxophone, *Bill MacKay* on guitar, and *Mary Halm* on bass. This summer they finished their first album, a collection of Zerang's tunes, and they're looking for a label.

Adding sound to dance and theater has been part of Zerang's practice from the very beginning. Later this month, he'll provide the music for a puppet adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 novel *The Left Hand of Darkness* by New York-based ensembles *Untitled Theater Company No. 61* and *Yara Arts Group*.

Premiering as part of the *Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival*, the production was created by *Untitled* director Edward Einhorn and puppeteer Tom Lee, codirector of the *Chicago Puppet Studio* and the *Chicago Puppet Lab* (both of which are divisions of the festival). It combines live actors with animation, projections, and puppets at several scales.

The *Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival* runs Wed 1/21 till Sun 2/1, and *The Left Hand of Darkness* will be performed seven times from Thu 1/29 through Sun 2/1. At publication time, all seven shows were sold out.

### As told to Philip Montoro

I would say at 17, 18 years old, I started accompanying modern-dance classes at a place called MoMing. The first piece I did was in 1978, and from 1978 through the mid-90s, I was writing music or performing music live with dance and then with theater.

I was with this company called Facets Performance Ensemble, and in [1985] we did a version of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* called *Macondo*. And we toured that for three and a half years. I got to know dancers and choreographers, and I started making pieces for them.

I moved more into working with physical theater, and then by the early 1990s, that's when I met [Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival founder] Blair Thomas. He had this company called Redmoon Theater, and I started writing music for puppet theater. I got awards for it and everything. I got three Joseph Jefferson Awards for original composition: 1996, *Frankenstein*; 1997, *Ballad of Frankie and Johnny*; 2001, *Hunchback*.

I would say 1977 I started as an improviser. Then by 1979, I decided that I wanted to formally study music. So I went to Roosevelt University, Chicago Musical College, and studied there for almost four years—composition and percussion.

I started playing music as an improviser, just sort of naively. I could have gone a more free-brain route, but I decided I wanted much more rigorous training. So I had ear training and harmony and, you know, all the basics.

At the same time, I was improvising with different groups. The first group was called *Musica Menta*, and it was a collection of other like-minded improvisers. Kent Kessler was one of them. Daniel Scanlan was one of them. My composition professor from Roosevelt, Don Malone, was one of them. There were a few other people, Katherine Hughes and David Noffs, and people came in and out.

A lot of performance artists at the time (and still) came from the visual arts. We were like a performance-art group that came from music. So we did that very intensively for several years, through '84, '85.

I was accompanying dance classes to earn a living. It was at that time that I realized that if I wanted to pursue this work, I would have to basically take a vow of poverty. I knew that I would never make a big living being an improvising musician—or writing music for dance, for that matter. I never took a job from that point on, until I had some kids. Then I bartended a couple of nights a week. But other than that, I always said, OK, I'll live or die by this stuff.

I didn't ultimately have to live in poverty. But I was prepared to, and I think that's a big deal at an early stage in a creative artist's life, to come to that realization that this is economically not gonna do it. I do not have a day job. Hell, I'm retired now. I'm 67.



Michael Zerang with the larger of the two rotating tube zithers he used during a December rehearsal of *The Left Hand of Darkness*.  
Credit: Kirk Williamson

I got back to Chicago after that four-month—in retrospect, I call it my vision quest. And then I picked up the darbuka, which was the instrument lying around the house. I met this guy, Daniel Scanlan, who played the violin, and we hit it off. We started to play together, and it grew from there.

I knew it had something to do with music—but also other performing art forms, actors, dancers, anyone that gets up in front of people where there's an audience. Because that was the thing I experienced, this communal *thing* that blew me away. So I started immediately figuring out, like, OK, what are these dancers doing? What are these actors doing? What's the connection? It's all live; it's all in front of people. It's all communal, in that we're all in the same space and we all have beating hearts in our chests. Where are these connections happening? So it was a really strong desire for me to investigate not just music but any live performing art.



Michael Zerang with his drums and one of the spinning tubes (at left) used to evoke the environment on the tundra of Orgoreyn in *The Left Hand of Darkness*.  
Credit: Kirk Williamson

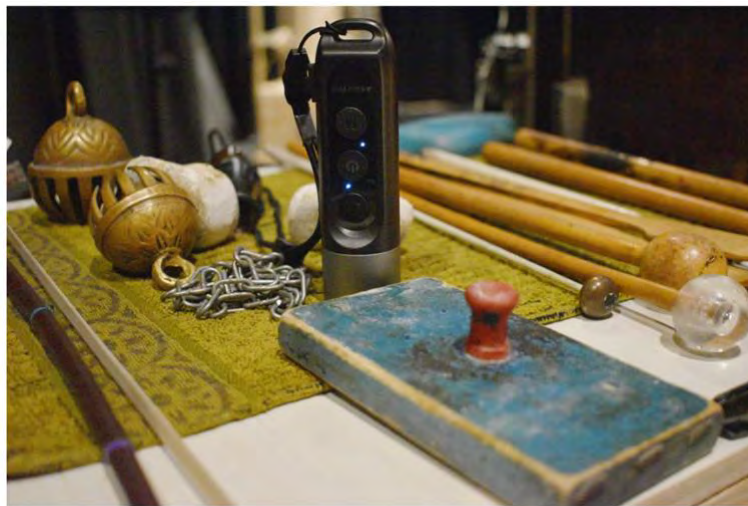
Accompanying dance classes can be kind of a rote, straight-ahead thing to do: You're playing a triplet rhythm on the bongo while they dance a phrase across the floor. On another level, there's bodies moving in space, and there's vibration that's in the space with them and coinciding with them. And there are all sorts of insights I gathered by working with dance and theater, puppet theater—insights I could bring into my music that I couldn't get readily in other ways.

On one level, the insight is like, how do actors, for instance, or dancers prepare? How do they work together? How do they learn their choreography? And on a more basic level, how do these people connect? They're using their bodies in time and space, and we're using vibration in time and space. But there's got to be a place where there's a commonality, because we're all doing basically the same thing in performing in a communal setting, doing some kind of ritualistic thing, whether it's with sound or movement or light or concept or word.

One thing that was so remarkable about this group of puppeteers that I was working with [to develop *The Left Hand of Darkness*] was they're all so skilled, and there's a million things they have to remember, from moment to moment. Every gesture, every movement, every transition has to be down to a T—it's not an easy thing at all. If you're an actor, you could embody a character, but if you're a puppeteer, you're one of three puppeteers that are moving this character, and you have to do it in concert with each other.

If you have three musicians that are working together, and you're really digging into something, you're each a part of the whole. And it's similar for these three puppeteers that are working, like, a bunraku puppet: One's doing the head and the right arm, the other one's doing the hip and the left arm, and the other one's doing the feet and the legs. If you want to make that thing look real and look alive and sustain that over a period of time, that's a tall order. That means three people working in concert so closely—that's remarkable. And to me: Wow, that's what musicians do! That's exactly the same thing.

When I go into a practice with musicians and we're trying to work something, a composition or whatever it is, we understand, going over and over and over again, that what we're trying to do is breathe together, and that we're all parts of the whole. And maybe I would have gotten that just working with musicians. But to deal with puppet theater, for instance, and see how they do it, and experience the results of what they're doing, and then bring that over to my practices—that's invaluable. Same with dancers; same with actors.



Some of Michael Zerang's percussion instruments for *The Left Hand of Darkness*  
Credit: Kirk Williamson

[T]he accompaniment I'm doing for *The Left Hand of Darkness* is all composed. The audio portions that I wrote music for, those are all set. But then the live stuff, I'm accompanying the action, so it's not really improvised, because the scenes go the way they go—it's in that in-between place between improvising and having something that's very set. On the one hand, I have a score I play all the way through. On the other hand, I can be there physically and have my eyes and my ears on the puppeteers, and I can move with them, so there's room for me to—I wouldn't say go off script, but make every moment as connected and as rich as possible.

So in that sense, yeah, I'm improvising, if you want to call it that, but I'm not really improvising in terms of taking it to a new place every time. There's something happening on the stage; I'm giving it life through sound. They're giving it life through movement. Someone else is giving it life through light. We're all working together to make an image, to make a story.

When I first started working with this group, Tom Lee invited me in December 2023. Since then we've met, I think, four or five times for these two-week intensive periods. So reading the book (several times) and then reading Edward Einhorn's adaptation, working with the other designers, the costume designers, the puppeteers, the set design. We had Zoom meetings all the time. So then my contribution became, OK, how do I think about sound and music in the context of something that takes place on another world?

Initially, I wrote a ton of music that was prerecorded, sort of placeholder accompaniment to different scenes. Over the past two years, I stripped away a lot of that stuff to bring in more live sound. This adaptation takes place in two acts, and the first act takes place in one country, Karhide, and then the second act takes place in Orgoreyn, which is basically a tundra that they sledge across. So there were two very different vibes.

For the second act, what I wanted to do was create a sonic world that was—I don't want to say "alien," but at least you know you're in a different place. You're not hearing flutes and cellos and things like that. It's more atmospheric, it's more ambient, it's more environmental. So that's when I started to figure out what kind of instruments I should create or have them build for me.



Michael Zerang demonstrates one of the rotating tube zithers he's using to accompany *The Left Hand of Darkness*. For the finished production, the instruments and other woodwork will be painted and decorated.  
Credit: Kirk Williamson

There's an instrument, a tube zither, that you pluck, basically, in your hand. And then I thought, OK, if it can rotate, then you can bow it. So I started to do a little bit of research and found that people have been doing something like that. And so I started to design [a rotating tube zither] with the idea of having two in the space. And this guy Erik Newman, a friend of mine, who's a great carpenter, he built it.

And then the other thing was these—like, every little kid spins those plastic tubes over their heads to get that whirling sound. I put those on motors, so they would spin constantly, and I could change the pitch a little bit. And the idea is to have three or four of those, maybe five of those, in the space. In that second act, they go on at various times in various intensities, to sort of undergird what's happening in the scenes.

Between that and the rotating tube zithers and then a big China cymbal and bass drum, that's it, basically. There's a siren in there and a few other effects. But I wanted to stay away from the “musical” stuff. The music that I prerecorded goes mostly with animations that the designers made that were projected. I'm working on getting it down to the only time you hear prerecorded music is with an animation, and then everything else is live and environmental.

The animation was also fixed at a certain point, and they're still working on it, and we'll still get final versions. So I could take it home and look at it and compose music directly and specifically for every moment of that. It's all synthesized—like bells and chimes, and there was some instrumentation, harps, but mostly I just did it on my computer. It wasn't recorded instruments; it was samples. And then the compositions themselves were sort of lush and romantic and specific to the tenor of the animation. Initially, I probably had 60 minutes of music that was precomposed, and now it's down to, I don't know, six or seven—three or four audio cues.

Karhide is a much more urban environment. There are more people around. There are buildings. There are places you go to meet with your counterparts. There's a king; you go to a castle. In the second half [in Orgoreyn], you're basically sledging across a tundra. There's nothing but cold and wind and ice, and you're half dead and you're exhausted. So to find the contrast there was pretty clear. I think those whirling tubes and the rotating tube zither and a few other things that I'll be using will put you in a place, more than accompany any particular action.



In this production of *The Left Hand of Darkness*, some of Michael Zerang's instruments are mounted on a structure that doubles as a transmitter (within the story) and as a screen for projecting animations. Everything here will be more thoroughly decorated for the final production.

Credit: Kirk Williamson

I didn't want to be overt about it. On the other hand, it's constant. I'm trying to push the envelope a little bit. Yeah, it's environmental and it's ambient, but there should be some quality that affects an audience. I don't like manipulative stuff, frankly, so I never write music for films. I did it a few times, but I don't like sound being used to manipulate people or their emotions or their thoughts—you know, swell the cellos when there's a love scene.

Now you're in a world that, if you're just sitting in a room with these whirling things that I created in the space, and they're constant, and they're shifting slowly—sometimes they're speeding up, sometimes they're slowing down, there are different densities of sound in the space—and if you're sitting there and experiencing just the sonics, where is that going to put you? It's almost like another layer as opposed to being a direct accompaniment.

If I'm writing music for dance or theater or puppet theater, the music or the sound is only a part of the scene. So I rarely go into something where I compose a piece of music that has all its i's dotted, t's crossed, and is a complete piece in and of itself. Because then, when you put a visual thing on top of that and an action on top of that, it becomes too much.

Maybe if you just listen to the sound of the music on its own, it feels like that's incomplete. It needs the other elements to complete it. I'm always very cautious about not being so completist in my output that other elements get either buried or there's a hierarchy of elements. I would rather be like an improviser: If I'm improvising with three or four different people, I'm not everything. I'm not a soloist. I'm working with everyone's sound. In this context, I'm doing the sound, but there's performance, there's lights, there's costumes. I'm a part of that.

I also feel that way with the other elements. I mean, a puppeteer needs to understand that when there's sound in the space, that's their bed. That's the air that you're walking through.

[The themes and plot elements in the novel] were a starting point for everything. What's being focused on in the adaptation is the relationship that these two beings have. There's a lot of tension that Le Guin put in between these characters. There's a lot of tension between the cultures, the prejudices. There's a lot of references, of course, to this gender fluidity. *[Editor's note: The protagonists are Genly Ai, a Terran envoy from a collection of worlds called the Ekumen, and Therem Harth rem ir Estraven, an exiled official from Karhide. The people of Estraven's world are largely ambisexual, with no notion of binary gender; they become sexually male or female, with either equally likely each time, for a few days every month.]*



Puppets of Genly Ai from *The Left Hand of Darkness* at various scales  
Credit: Kirk Williamson

What I'm trying to do is follow the emotional score that's underlying everything, without being manipulative. So when time passes, even outside of the actual story, you're getting an undertow. The whole second act, I feel like I'm really setting up a place for this action to happen.

The puppeteering—watching them work is really profound for me. The way they have to work with one another, and then just technically, keeping hundreds and hundreds of props straight backstage, where you don't even see them, but they have to go, they have to get something, they have to change a costume—all this stuff is pretty stunning. The actors are really good as well. They have an ability to switch voices, which I always like. There's aspects of the design that I love. I think the puppet making was really great. I think a lot of the visuals in the projections are great. Sometimes they're really simple, sometimes they're really complex, but they're always compelling.

Every once in a while I get to stand outside of the piece and just watch it, and that's when all that richness comes. Often when I'm performing, I'm on the side, so there's only certain things I can see. Also I just like the process of working with actors and puppeteers and having a director sitting outside and having designers be an intimate part of discussions. Even if it has nothing to do with the music, I love sitting in a Zoom meeting and listening to the costume designer. I find it a very rich process, and I feel like I learn a lot.

Ideally, in any production, I want to see that it has some lingering effect—thinking about it later, flashing on moments of it down the road. I know for our fact that one day I saw a performance, and I walked out of that performance and was completely transformed. It changed my entire life trajectory.

When I was sitting in that audience at Roland Kirk, when I was, whatever, 16 years old, the people next to me were probably out on a date, having a couple drinks, listening to some good music, and when they left, they didn't think about it again. And here I am.

I always assume, for any performance, whether it's just a music gig or a big full-blown production like this, that it has the potential to affect people profoundly. That's the best you can hope for, right? I mean, I remember someone coming up to me in the 90s. I was doing a gig with Fred Lonberg-Holm, and this young kid was floating through town, and he caught our gig. And then he became a musician, and his name is [Frank Rosaly](#). Like, damn! He told me that years later. I'm humbled. I mean, yeah, you saw my concert and decided to become a musician. That's a big deal. But I get it completely.

Frank Rosaly is one of my favorite musicians now. He's so brilliant, and he does all these great things, and it's just like—all he needed, apparently, at that moment, was some kind of spark to completely flip his switch. And you never know. So that's always what I'm hoping for, and I know that it's possible because I lived it. 🎵

# Chicago Parent

## Best free things to do with kids in Chicago this January

Museums, winter festivals and iconic Chicago experiences for kids.



By Andreas Merk-Barrett January 13, 2026

< Share



Phot credit: Danny Kaan

Chicago parents and caregivers can find dozens of free things to do with kids across the city this January, including museum days, winter festivals, skating and animal exhibits that make exploring Chicago in winter affordable and fun.

### Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Free Neighborhood Tour

Times vary; Jan. 22-Feb. 1, 2026

Short, live puppet performances travel to neighborhood venues across the city during this touring festival. Expect imaginative storytelling, music and plenty of audience participation.

- **Address:** 3611 W. Cermak Road, Chicago
- **Age fit:** All ages
- **Indoor/outdoor:** Indoor
- **Registration:** No tickets required; first-come, first-served

THINGS TO DO ENTERTAINMENT AND CULTURE

## 15 things to do this week in Chicago: Jan. 15-21

Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, Jimmy Sutton's Four Charms and a Paul Tazewell costume exhibit at the Griffin Museum of Science and Industry are among the highlights in the week ahead.

By Mary Houlihan | Jan 14, 2026, 5:30pm CST



Wakka Wakka's "Dead as a Dodo" (Jan. 21-25 at Studebaker Theater, 410 S. Michigan Ave.) will kick off the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. | David Zadig

- Puppeteers from around the world come to town for the 2026 edition of the **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival**. The fest opens with Wakka Wakka's "Dead as a Dodo" (Jan. 21-25 at Studebaker Theater, 410 S. Michigan Ave.; \$40-\$48). All-ages shows and adult late-night cabarets are offered as well as exhibits and interactive workshops. From Jan. 21-Feb. 1 at various venues. Ticket prices vary. Visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).

# Instagram



## chicagoparent ...

Chicago Parent

3,670 posts 29.3K followers 1,689 following

Your go-to guide for parenting in Chicagoland! 🏡

🌸 Things to Do 📖 Tips 📄 Resources

👤 Inspiring families since 1984

🔗 [www.chicagoparent.com/instagram](http://www.chicagoparent.com/instagram) and 4 more



Followed by [paramountaurora](#), [amynelsonphoto](#) + 40 more



chicagoparent

Bruno Mars • I Just Might



[chicagoparent](#) 🗨️ Chicago families, this is one winter event worth putting on your calendar.

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival returns January 21-February 1, 2026, bringing 12 straight days of performances to venues all over the city. Families can experience puppetry styles from around the world, from shadow puppets and marionettes to object-based theater and hands-on works designed to spark curiosity.

There are shows created for all ages, free events throughout the festival and a wide range of performance styles that go far beyond what many parents expect when they hear the word puppets. It's one of those events that works just as well for first-time theatergoers as it does for kids who already love the arts.

Cold weather doesn't stop this festival. In fact, it's one of the best reasons to get out and explore Chicago in January.

👉 Read the full story and see what families should know before going at the link in bio.

[#chicagoparent](#) [#chicagopuppetfest](#) [#chicagofamilyfun](#)



Liked by [chipuppetfest](#) and 10 others

8 hours ago



Add a comment...

Post

Chicago Tribune  
A+E

# Chicago's International Puppet Theater Festival returns



**By Emily McClanathan**  
For the Chicago Tribune

If there's one thing that the annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival always delivers, it's sheer range. The eighth iteration, running January 21 through February 1, features retellings of classics by Bhavabhuti, Shakespeare, Ibsen and Ursula K. Le Guin, plus a glimpse into Harlem history and a futuristic adventure with a reincarnated dodo. A free neighborhood tour and a Roald Dahl-inspired musical cater to young audiences, while adult offerings include late-night cabarets and a ribald exploration of puppet sexuality.

Equally eclectic are the puppetry styles and tech-

niques on display, such as bunraku, shadow puppetry, marionettes, crankies and object-based works. Artists performing in the 2026 festival hail from Denmark, France, India, Norway, South Korea, Spain and the United Kingdom, as well as Chicago and other U.S. cities.

Since its inception in 2015, the festival has grown into the largest of its kind in North America, attracting a record 22,000 attendees in 2025. Founder and artistic director Blair Thomas partially credits this success to the festival's consistent track record of meeting audiences' high expectations since shifting from a biannual to annual schedule in 2022.

"It was this feeling that

we're really part of the culture in Chicago, and that we're anticipated," Thomas said of the 2025 festival. "People now remember it and carry it with them, and they bring that energy to the performances themselves," he told the Tribune.

As the 2026 festival opener, Norwegian and New York-based company Wakka Wakka reprises "**Dead As a Dodo**," a stand-alone play that also concludes the "Anima-lia Trilogy," which the company performed in full two years ago. Another festival regular, French Norwegian company Plexus Polaire, lends a haunted house atmosphere to Ibsen's 1879 play, "**A**

**Turn to Puppet**, Page 3

"The Enormous Crocodile" is presented by the Roald Dahl Story Company of England at the Studebaker Theater as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. **DANNY KAAN**

## Puppet

from Page 1

**Doll's House,** with life-sized puppets, dead birds and a possessed choir. A second Plexus Polaire production, **"Trust Me for a While,"** blends horror and comedy to explore the strange relationship between a ventriloquist and his dummy.

Also coming from Europe is **"La Méridienne"** by France's Théâtre de la Massue, an unconventional spin on dinner theater that combines a multi-course meal from Chicago chef Chris Sullivan with a short puppet play, performed one-on-one for each guest in a separate room. Danish company Sofie Krog Theatre sets its comic thriller, **"The House,"** in a family-owned funeral home, while England's Blind Summit Theatre strikes a balance between filthy humor and frank conversations in **"The Sex Lives of Puppets,"** drawing on real-life responses to Great Britain's National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles.

Fewer continents are represented in the 2026 festival compared to recent years, with just two non-European international productions, both from Asia. In **"About Ram,"** India's Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust uses animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets to stage excerpts from 8th-century Sanskrit writer Bhavabhuti's version of the "Ramayana," an ancient epic about an incarnation of the god Vishnu. Geumhyung Jeong, a multidisciplinary artist from South Korea, contemplates the interplay between technology and the human body in **"Oil Pressure Vibrator,"** a hybrid of film, lecture and performance art.

From Chicago, Emmy Award-winning ensemble Manual Cinema's **"The 4th Witch"** reimagines Shakespeare's "Macbeth" as a young girl's quest for vengeance against a backdrop of generational violence. In **"Rhynocer-**



Dixon Place presents "The Harlem Doll Palace," written by Alva Rogers and directed by Ash Winkfield, here in a New York production in 2024. **RICHARD TERMINE**



"Rhynoceron," directed and designed by KT Shivak, will be at the Chopin Theatre as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival. **RICHARD TERMINE**

**ron;** Chicagoan KT Shivak and company use a life-size rhinoceros puppet to recount the history of humans hunting this remarkable animal.

Other U.S.-based productions include **"The Matchbox Shows,"** a miniature cabaret by Portland artist Laura Heit; the return of the popular **"Nasty, Brutish & Short"** late-night comedies, and the world

premiere of **"The Left Hand of Darkness,"** an adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's 1969 sci-fi novel. Plus, in a festival first, Thomas dons his performer's hat in **"Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?"** — a blend of live music (featuring local saxophone quartet ~Nois), shadow puppetry and a crankie comprising several hand-painted, 100-foot-long scrolls.

**"The Harlem Doll Palace"** brings a particularly personal touch from Alva Rogers, playwright, puppeteer and artistic director of the New York-based Alva Puppet Theater. With original music by Bruce Monroe, this historical play is based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a public school teacher who created a doll museum

telling the story of this ancestor, and all ancestors, because I want this history to be known," Rogers said in a Tribune interview.

The festival wouldn't be complete without its kid-friendly productions, and this year's headliner is **"The Enormous Crocodile,"** a new musical based on the picture book by Roald Dahl. A cast of friendly animals — portrayed by designer Toby Olié's colorful, whimsical puppets — helps young audiences learn about courage as they thwart a naughty reptile with an appetite for children. Already a hit in the UK, the show is now touring the U.S. for the first time, with Chicago marking its third stop.

"The mission of the work was to create an amazing, quality piece of theater for children and their families, because we believe that theater is an incredible space for engendering connection, community and belonging," said director Emily Lim.

Lim's approach complements the ethos of the festival's annual neighborhood tour, which presents free, family-friendly shows in community venues across the city. This year's tour includes two productions: **"Stone by Stone,"** by Spanish artist Tian Gombau, and **"Happy Birthday, Mon Ami"** from the Baltimore-based duo Alex and Olmsted.

Beyond this extensive performance lineup, the festival offers various activities for those who want to engage further: panel discussions, book talks, workshops, exhibitions and a pop-up shop and café at the Fine Arts Building. In short, it's a puppet extravaganza with something for aficionados and newbies alike.

*Emily McClanathan is a freelance critic.*

*The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival runs Jan. 21-Feb. 1 at various venues across Chicago. Visit [ChicagoPuppetFest.org](http://ChicagoPuppetFest.org) for schedules and tickets.*



"The Sex Lives of Puppets" by Blind Summit Theatre of England at the Biograph Theatre in Chicago.

**CHARLIE LYNE**

in her three-story Harlem brownstone.

Before Aunt Len's death in 1999, Rogers got to know her during several visits to the museum, which prompted the playwright to base her graduate thesis production on the doll museum and, years later, to create the current version of the play. Directed by Ash Winkfield, an all-Black cast of puppeteers portrays the stories of individual dolls inspired by Hoyt's collection, from antebellum cloth dolls to a Thomas Edison talking doll.

"I want to continue



Stage Dance: At the Barre The Play's The Thing What's Hot

## BEST BETS: JANUARY 19TH – JANUARY 25TH

*Puppets, dance, dueling couples and mixed reality*

By **Craig Byrd** - January 19, 2026

The return of two important festival, a celebration of dance, an audacious pairing of plays and something entirely new find their way onto Best Bets: January 19<sup>th</sup> – January 25<sup>th</sup>:



*Christopher Bruce's "Troubadour" (Photo by Mark Bruce/Courtesy Royal Opera House)*

**MODERN MILESTONES - Yorke Dance Project** - Royal Opera House Lindbury Theatre - London, England - January 19<sup>th</sup> - January 22<sup>nd</sup>

YDP is doing a lot of celebrating in this new program: Martha Graham Dance Company's 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, the centenary of dancer/choreographer Robert Cohan's birth, choreographer Christopher Bruce's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Lewitzky Dance Company.

The program accomplishes this by performing Graham's *Deep Solo*, Cohan's *Lacrymosa*, Bruce's *Troubadour* (set to the music of Leonard Cohen) and Lewitzky's *Kinaesonata*.

Since it is also Liam Francis's year as YDP's first associate artists, his *CAST [x]* is also being performed.

This should be a fascinating program of modern dance.

For tickets and more information, please go [HERE](#).

**AN ARK** – The Shed – New York, NY – Now – March 1<sup>st</sup> OPENING NIGHT: January 21<sup>st</sup>

*An Ark* seems like an oxymoron: a play about living, grieving and connecting is presented through "mixed reality." Meaning, through glasses you experience the cast perform this piece by Simon Stephens (*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*) individually while in a theater with countless other people. The actors aren't in person.

The cast is Arinzé Kene, Ian McKellen, Golda Rosheuvel and Rosie Sheehy.

Anything McKellen is doing is something worth exploring. Stephens is a great writer and director Sarah Frankcom has a terrific pedigree.

One hopes that this "understanding of the human condition, encompassing the joy of first love and the inevitability of death" will lead audiences to make more personal connections after taking the glasses off and seeing the world through their own eyes. It's a journey I'd happily take.

For tickets and more information, please go [HERE](#).



"A Doll's House" (Photo by Johan Karlsson/Courtesy Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival)

**CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL** – Multiple Venues – Chicago, IL – January 21<sup>st</sup> – February 1<sup>st</sup>

As a lifelong fan of puppetry (and I'm not talking about the Punch and Judy style), I will always include this festival in Best Bets. This is a world class festival featuring puppetry from around the world. This year's festival includes artists and companies from Denmark, England, France, India, Norway, Scotland, South Korea and Spain. There are also US-based companies and local Chicago-based ones as well.

Amongst this year's participants that intrigue me the most are Blind Summit Theatre's *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, Plexus Polaire's *A Doll's House* Untitled Theatre Co. No. 61 and Yara Arts Group's *The Left Hand of Darkness* and Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust's *About Ram*.

Those titles alone indicate that not every show here is made for children. Though there are some of those, too.

For tickets and more information, please go [HERE](#).



"Dreams Decent" (Courtesy Dance Camera West 2026 Festival)

**DANCE CAMERA WEST 2026 FESTIVAL** – Multiple Venues – Los Angeles, CA – January 22<sup>nd</sup> – January 25<sup>th</sup>

Dance films, those specifically made to showcase dance, get no better festival than DCW's annual festival. This year's festival will include over 40 films (both shorts and documentaries) from all over the world.

Amongst the titles that most intrigue me are *West* by Thomas Bos, *One & One Other [Episode 1]* by Shawn Fitzgerald Ahern and Emilie Leriche; *Carmen* by Andrew Margetson and *Waiting Places* by Bobbi Jene Smith and Or Schraiber.

The festival will have a David Roussève retrospective that features a screening of his film and a talk back with the dancer/choreographer. You might remember we interviewed him for the world premiere of *Becoming Daddy AF*. You can watch that interview [HERE](#).

There is also a celebration of Shirley Clarke and this year's *LA POPS UP* is curated by Kitty McNamee. You can see Cultural Attaché interview with her [HERE](#).

Events are taking place at Colburn's Zipper Hall in downtown Los Angeles, the Philosophical Research Society in Los Feliz and Théâtre Raymond Kabbaz in West Los Angeles.

For tickets and more information, please go [HERE](#).



Brian Vaughn and Kim Martin-Cotton in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* (Photo by Jon White/Courtesy SCR)

**GOD OF CARNAGE/WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?** – South Coast Rep – Costa Mesa, CA – January 23<sup>rd</sup> – March 21<sup>st</sup>

This is an audacious pairing that I hope succeeds brilliantly. Yasmina Reza's *God of Carnage* and Edward Albee's landmark play are playing in repertory on the Segerstrom Stage. Two plays that look at marriage and relationships in very different ways.

Both plays will feature Kim Martin-Cotton and Brian Vaughan. They play Martha and George in *Virginia Woolf* and Annette and Alan in *God of Carnage*. I hope they have good throat lozenges!

Joining them in *Carnage* are Don Donohue and Melinda Page Hamilton. Appears as Nick and Honey in *Virginia Woolf* are Gabriel Gaston and Elysia Roorbach.

So many productions of both these plays rely on star power. After all, they are juicy roles. That these productions feature well-established stage actors without the baggage of celebrity should offer a refreshing look at both plays.

For tickets and more information for *GOD OF CARNAGE*, please go [HERE](#). For tickets and more information for *WHO'S AFRAID OF VIRGINIA WOOLF?*, please go [here](#).

That's all for *BEST BETS: JANUARY 19<sup>th</sup> – JANUARY 25<sup>th</sup>*. Enjoy your week and go see a show!

Main Photo: *The Sex Lives of Puppets* (Photo by Charlie Lyne/Courtesy Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival)

## SHOWCASE

# CANDIDLY CARNAL

‘Sex Lives of Puppets’ explores frank conversations about sex — no strings attached

BY STEFANO ESPOSITO,  
STAFF REPORTER

[sesposito@suntimes.com](mailto:sesposito@suntimes.com) | [@slesposito](https://www.suntimes.com/author/stefano-esposito/)

Nothing ruins a Las Vegas sex party like a phone call from your spouse in which she explains that she’s just discovered a lump in her breast.

Sex is messy, complicated; it is true for humans and, it turns out, for puppets too.

They have hang-ups. They’ve got saggy bits. They enjoy kinks.

“I suppose the message is: penises are OK; we should talk about [sex] more; and everyone’s doing it and it’s all weird,” said Mark Down, the co-writer and co-director of “The Sex Lives of Puppets,” part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival (Jan. 21-Feb. 1 at various locations across the city). “Sex Lives” runs Jan. 26-31 at The Biograph’s Zacek McVay Mainstage, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.

This year’s festival brings 80 or so performers to Chicago from across the United States and around the globe.

“The ‘Sex Lives’ is very fun, very accessible. ... I would challenge anyone who has hesitations to come to any of our shows, and they will see something they have never seen in their lives,” said festival founder Blair Thomas.

What makes “Sex Lives” different than, say, the bawdy puppet sex scene in Trey Parker and Matt Stone’s 2004 film “Team America: World Police” is that the show is loosely based on the lives of real, ordinary people.

It is improvised, but many of the candidly carnal conversations between the puppets originated with a survey of modern-day British attitudes about sex, done by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, including one participant who attended an orgy in Sin City without his spouse.

“It’s amazing how rare the sort of husband and wife and three kids is in the survey ...,” said



“The Sex Lives of Puppets” brings conversations with real people talking frankly about sex to the stage through puppets. The show runs Jan. 26-31 at The Biograph’s Zacek McVay Mainstage, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave., as part of the Chicago International Puppet Festival.

CHARLIE LYNE

Down, chatting with the Chicago Sun-Times from a flat in Vilnius, Lithuania, where his partner is a diplomat on a six-month assignment. “When you go straight in on sex, what comes out really quickly is that [many] people are living with second husbands, second partners. It’s a massively complicated sort of web.”

There isn’t actually that much sex in the 1½-hour show. Much of it is puppet couples talking about sex — like the old-married-couple

interludes in the 1989 romantic comedy “When Harry Met Sally,” leading to sweet, often tender moments, Down said.

“There is a couple that have sex,

## ‘THE SEX LIVES OF PUPPETS’

**When:** Jan. 26-31

**Where:** Zacek McVay Theatre, The Biograph, 2433 N. Lincoln Ave.

**Tickets:** \$49

**Info:** [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org)

but they are kind of in the middle of an interview when they do it. So it’s like a couple’s therapy that turns into a sex scene,” he said.

The puppets aren’t “anatomically complete,” except those in the shadow porno sequence of the show, which Down described as “absolutely juvenile.”

Down, who is in his late 50s, has had a long and distinguished career in the puppet world. The artistic director of the London-based Blind Summit Theatre

company, Down conceived puppets for the opening ceremony of the 2012 Summer Olympics in London, for the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles and the Metropolitan Opera, among other venues.

It’s an unusual life journey for someone who originally completed training to become a medical doctor and worked in an emergency room.

“Then I went to drama school,” he said.

But why puppets having and talking about sex?

It was an idea Blind Summit developed not long after the pandemic ended. The company was working on other shows and during breaks in rehearsals: “The puppets were all talking about sex, and we were all laughing. Then we’d go back to the rehearsals and it was really boring,” Down said.

“Sex Lives” debuted at London’s Southwark Playhouse in January 2024.

“The first day we did it, I left the house like a condemned man, thinking I was going to be canceled,” Down said of the premiere. “I was beyond terrified. I was sort of doomed. I thought, *whatever else happens, I can do 10 days*. And then people loved it. It was an extraordinary reaction.”

The show has also played in Scotland and Denmark.

“Their English is incredible and their minds are filthy. So it’s perfect,” Down says of the Danish.

With a show that includes shadow pornography, it’s obviously not intended for children.

Is there anything he and his cast won’t touch?

Down has to think about that, before answering, “I’m not aware of anything.”

How about shadow oral sex?

“I’m afraid — or I promise — there is.”

For tickets and the festival schedule, go to [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).



Monday, January 19, 2026

### The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Returns January 21-February 1, 2026

#### Chi, IL Live Shows On Our Radar: The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival



Here at Chill Live Shows and Chill Mama we've been covering Chicago's vibrant puppet scene since 2008. And we've been extensively covering The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival since its inception in 2015. We are so fortunate here in Chicago, to host puppeteers from around the globe for 12 days of spectacular shows, intimate works and special events all over the city, January 21-February 1, 2026.

I love that modern puppetry has elevated from an often ignored, fringe element of theatre, begging for coverage, to a wildly popular genre, selling out shows at a record pace. Sadly, the bigger The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival has grown, the harder it's become to get press tickets to cover all the shows. Despite applying to review all 19 productions, I was only given tickets to 7, and all my top choices were sold out and/or closed to press. So I'll be featuring the heck out of the 7 I am able to see. Check back January 21-February 1 like we vote in Chicago, early and often. I'll be posting lots of social media updates and reviews as the fest ramp up. \*\*\*\* I've noted those I'm covering with 4 asterisks

Two of the ones I'd hoped to see are Chicago locals, so I do have hope they'll all do a remount I can catch in the near future. I was shut out of covering Manual Cinema's The 4th Witch, as well as Rhinoceros by local puppeteer and Jeff Award-winning puppet designer KT Shivak. I'm also very much hoping for a remount of The Left Hand of Darkness, in from New York.

**KNOW BEFORE YOU GO:** Many of the fest's offerings are geared toward adults, so be sure to check out age recommendations below and on the puppet fest's site.

**MULTI CULTI: WE'RE BETTER TOGETHER** Despite the USA's current administration's aversion to DEI and multiculturalism, we're thrilled that puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea and Spain, are slated for the fest. The U.S. and Chicago cool kids are also well represented and we love the international friendships and collaborations the fest fosters. **Fingers crossed all the performers and their puppets/sets/costumes safely make it through customs and enjoy their weeks in Chicago unmolested by ICE and Border Patrol!**

**NEED AN EXCUSE TO LEAVE THE COUCH?** Bundle up and check out the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, showcasing different forms of traditional and contemporary puppet styles, from bunraku-style to shadow puppetry, marionettes to object-based works.

Tickets to more than 100 shows, events and interactive workshops are on sale at [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org). Don't wait. Despite Chicago's cold winters, tickets to the Chicago Puppet Festival are always the hottest ticket in town come January. In fact, some shows are already sold out.

#### Highlights I'm covering include:



\*\*\*\*Fan favorite **Wakka Wakka**, featuring artists from Norway and New York, opens this year's festival with **Dead as a Dodo**, a mesmerizing musical odyssey about survival, transformation, and the power of true friendship. Infused with puppetry, humor, and stunningly innovative visual effects, **Dead as a Dodo**, commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, takes audiences deep into the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, may be shattering the established order of the dead. This production is returning after a prior stint at the fest in 2024. Still, I'll be catching this one again. Highly recommended. Don't miss this! **Check out my past Dead as a Dodo review HERE:** <https://www.chillmama.com/2024/01/world-premiere-of-wakka-wakkas.html>

**Dead as a Dodo**  
**Wakka Wakka (Norway/U.S.)**  
**Studebaker Theater, Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave., downtown Chicago**  
**January 21-25**

**Five shows: Wednesday, January 21 at 7 p.m.; Friday, January 23 at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, January 24 at 2 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Sunday, January 25 at 2 p.m.**

**80 minutes**  
**8 and up**  
**Tickets: \$40-\$48**

[wakkawakka.org/dead-as-a-dodo](http://wakkawakka.org/dead-as-a-dodo)



\*\*\*\*In a late addition to the line-up, festival founder and artistic director **Blair Thomas** returns to the stage with his original new work **Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?**, a large-scale, four-panel crankie offering insight into the rascally nature of a dog and his owner. I've enjoyed interviewing Blair Thomas several times over the years and rolling video on another of his infamous crankies for Chill Live Shows and Chill Mama. **Check out those blasts from the past HERE:**

*Gorey's Gashlycrumb Tinies Puppet Show--Blair Thomas & Co*

*Chill Mama Chats with Puppeteers Blair Thomas and Magali Chouinard*

*Chill Mama's Houdini Box Interview With Blair Thomas and Hannah Kohl*

**Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?**  
**Blair Thomas (Chicago/U.S.)**  
**Chopin Theater, 1543 W. Division St., Wicker Park**  
**January 25-26**

**Four shows: Sunday, January 25 at 8 p.m.; Monday, January 26 at 2 p.m., 5 p.m. and 8 p.m.**

**45 minutes**  
**All Ages**  
**Tickets \$35-\$45**



\*\*\*\*New York's Alva Puppet Theatre presents *The Harlem Doll Palace*, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a beloved public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from Aunt Len's "dollection" as they recreate their journeys to their museum.

*The Harlem Doll Palace*  
Alva Puppet Theatre (New York City/U.S.)  
Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts, East Theater, UChicago, 915 E. 60th St., Hyde Park  
January 22-24

Five shows: Thursday, January 22 at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Friday, January 23 at 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, January 24 at 6 p.m.

80 minutes  
10 and up  
Tickets: \$35-\$43  
[alvapuppettheater.com/theharlemdollpalace](http://alvapuppettheater.com/theharlemdollpalace)

**ChILL Mama's Chi, IL Picks List: a family friendly show & a 2 for 1 discount code too!**



\*\*\*\*Family audiences will love Roald Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile* by England's Roald Dahl Story Company. In this mischievous musical, based on Dahl's snappy book with toe-tapping tunes, the titular star weaves through the jungle with his tummy rumbling, while other jungle creatures foil his secret plans to stop this greedy brute. Audiences will go from the jungle into outer space and back again, just in time for a wild dance party!



Roald Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile*  
Roald Dahl Story Company (England)  
Studebaker Theater, Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave., downtown Chicago  
January 29-February 1

Seven shows: Thursday, January 29 at 1 p.m.; Friday, January 30 at 10:30 a.m. and 6 p.m.; Saturday, January 31 at 11 a.m. and 4 p.m.; Sunday, February 1 at 10 a.m. and 1 p.m.

(Note: Post-festival performances continue through February 21)

55 minutes  
All ages  
Tickets: \$40-48, with discounted tickets available for school groups  
[enormouscrocodilemusical.com](http://enormouscrocodilemusical.com)

The Roald Dahl Story Company:  
*Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile*

Limited-Time Offer:

Use code **SNAPUP** for 2-for-1 tickets!



\*\*\*\*India's **Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust** makes their **Chicago debut with About Ram**, an experimental theatrical piece using excerpts from the Bhavbhuti's "Ramayana," an epic tale and guide for Hindu principles like dharma, told through animation, digitally projected dance, masks and puppets.

**About Ram**  
**Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust (India)**  
**Dance Center of Columbia College, 1306 S. Michigan Ave., downtown Chicago**  
**January 29-31**

**Four shows: Thursday, January 29 at 7:30 p.m.; Friday, January 30 at 1 p.m. and 6 p.m.; Saturday, January 31 at 12 p.m.**

**60 minutes**  
**5 and up**  
**Tickets: \$15-\$35**  
[katkatha.org](http://katkatha.org)



\*\*\*\*Audiences of all ages will delight in the magic of sequined **Portland puppet raconteur Laura Heit's The Matchbox Shows**, teeny tiny puppet shows performed inside matchboxes, "the smallest, greatest, bravest, show in the world." In addition to seeing Heit perform live, catch Laura Heit: Short Films, a showcase of her short films featuring drawing, stop-motion and puppetry, presented in the fest's first-ever collaboration with Chicago's Music Box Theatre.

**The Matchbox Shows**  
**Laura Heit (Portland/U.S.)**  
**Constellation, 3111 N. Western Ave., Roscoe Village/Avondale**  
**January 22-25**

**Seven shows: Thursday, Friday and Saturday, January 22- 24 at 8 p.m. and 10 p.m.; Sunday, January 25 at 8 p.m.**

**50 minutes**  
**13 and up**  
**Tickets: \$25-33**

[lauraheit.com/the-matchbox-shows](http://lauraheit.com/the-matchbox-shows)



\*\*\*\*From Seoul, South Korea comes **Oil Pressure Vibrator** created by and featuring **Geumhyung Jeong**, an artist who's interested in the human body, the objects that surround it, with a particularly strange fascination with the excavator. Witness as Jeong plunges a big bucket into preconceptions about sexuality, technology and the body. **For adult audiences only.**

**Oil Pressure Vibrator**  
**Geumhyung Jeong (South Korea)**  
**Chopin Theatre Mainstage, 1543 W. Division St., Wicker Park**  
**January 30-31**



### Giant Puppet Lanterns

#### Giant Puppet Lanterns

In addition to the incredible pageant of international and U.S. puppetry artists, **The Puppet Hub** is back and open throughout the festival on the fourth floor of the Fine Arts Building. It's the perfect place to relax between shows, meet up with friends, make new ones, and learn more about contemporary puppetry. Attractions include **The Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Cafe**, serving coffee, tea, winter soups and baked treats, the **Pop-Up Puppet Shop**, and two free exhibits: **Two Ways Down**, featuring festival artist **Laura Helt's** exquisite hand-drawn animation and film inspired by Hieronymus Bosch's "The Garden of Earthly Delights," and a room full of **giant lantern puppets** created in the pre-festival workshop with **Andrew Kim of Thingamigig**.

Puppetry enthusiasts are also welcome to check out the **free Ellen Van Volkenburg Symposium**, the Catapult Artist intensive, professional education workshops with visiting puppet artists, and more.

*Now presented annually, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is the largest event of its kind in North America. Last year's festival attracted a record audience - more than 22,000 fans of puppetry, ranging from Chicago residents to international guests who choose Chicago as their travel destination in the middle of January to enjoy world-class puppet productions from here and abroad.*

Visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org) for tickets and information about the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, and sign up for the festival's e-news. Follow the festival on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) or [Vimeo](#), hashtag [#ChiPuppetFest](#).

#### Festival funders

Supporters of the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival include the Paul M. Angell Family Foundation, Art Legacy Institute, Cheryl Lynn Bruce and Kerry James Markhall, The Chicago Community Trust, Chicago Park District Night Out in the Parks Program, City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs and Special Events, Richard H. Driehaus Foundation, Ferdi Foundation/Julie Muller, Illinois Arts Council, Jerles Family Foundation/Justine Jerles and Dan Kuruna, Paul Levy and Mia Park, The Riva & David Logan Foundation, John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Marasak Foundation, Marshall Frankel Foundation, Kristy and Brandon Moran, Pritzker Foundation, and Deb and Andy Wolkenin.

### About the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

Originally founded in 2015 as a project of Blair Thomas & Co., the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival has highlighted artists from nations including Belgium, Chile, China, France, Germany, India, Indonesia, Israel, Japan, Kenya, Korea, Mexico, Norway, Puerto Rico, Poland, Scotland and South Africa as well as from Chicago and across the U.S. with the goal of promoting peace, equality, and justice on a global scale.

Already, the Chicago Puppet Festival is the largest of its kind in North America. Last year's 2025 festival attracted a record 22,000+ audience members to 29 different Chicago venues large and small to enjoy an entertaining and eclectic array of puppet styles from around the world.

In 2022, the Festival moved from a biennial to an annual event, and tripled its footprint in Chicago's historic Fine Arts Building. It opened an expanded office suite, debuted the Chicago Puppet Studio, which designs and fabricates puppets for theaters and events around the U.S., and launched the Chicago Puppet Lab, an education space and developmental residency designed to incubate more works of boundary-breaking puppetry in Chicago, expand equity in the field of puppetry, and encourage interdisciplinary experimentation in puppet theater.

*It's fitting that the Fine Arts Building is home again to one of the most influential puppetry organizations in the world. In 1912, after Ellen Van Volkenburg founded the Little Theater of Chicago in the Fine Arts Building, she needed a name for the actors manipulating marionettes in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. So she credited them in the program with a new word, "puppelore." Many agree this marked the initial intersection of traditional puppetry with contemporary theater still practiced today, and now flourishing around the world.*

Expanded operations are overseen by Artistic Director and Festival Founder Blair Thomas and Executive Director Sandy Smith Gerding, with Cameron Heinze and La Mar Brown, Business Managers; Taylor Gibat, Festival Coordinator and Director of Education; Dindre Huckabay, Grants & Giving Manager; Jess Mott Wickstrom, Web + Visual Communication Designer; Margaret Nelson and Frank Rose, Festival Production Managers; Zachary Sun, Studio Coordinator; Tom Lee, Co-Director, Chicago Puppet Lab and Studio; Grace Needleman, Co-Director Chicago Puppet Lab; and Callin McLeod, Chicago Puppet Studio Project Manager.

For more information and the full lineup, visit [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org).



**Blair and Wakka Wakka *Dead as a Dodo* live, in-studio Tuesday, January 20, 10:50 am**



**Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival returns for 8th year | ChicagoNOW**

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival kicks off its 8th edition, bringing 12 days of live puppetry to theaters and community spaces across the city through Feb. 1.

Posted January 20, 2026 11:43am CST

# Block Club Chicago

## Sex Lives Of Puppets? Chicago's Puppet Theater Fest Boasts Something For Every Audience

The eighth annual International Puppet Theater Festival starts Wednesday and runs through Feb. 1, including a family-oriented Roald Dahl adaptation, free neighborhood tours and the adults-only performance "The Sex Lives of Puppets."



By Web Behrens · 18 minutes ago



Alex and Olmstead's "Happy Birthday, Mon Ami" is one of the free neighborhood tour options in this year's Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: L Hewitt Photography

CHICAGO — Eleven years ago, shortly before the inaugural edition of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, founder Blair Thomas stated an ambitious goal: "Our festival is going to redefine what the word 'puppetry' means to audiences."

Fast forward to today: The festival has become the largest event of its kind in North America, an annual celebration that lures top talent from across the globe. The eighth iteration kicks off Wednesday evening; over the following week and a half, dozens of sites across the city will host a wide array of shows.

The artists showcasing their work come from everywhere — including Chicago, of course, but also South Korea, India, England and Norway. The fest's poster this year features the adults-only performance "The Sex Lives of Puppets" by London-based troupe Blind Summit.



During a recent interview with Block Club, Thomas smiled warmly when asked if he'd met his intention from 2015.

"We've developed a really large following of people in Chicago who now have experienced several years of world-class puppetry," he said. "They have high expectations, which is fantastic. That was one of my goals: to raise the bar for the field."



"The Left Hand of Darkness" by Ursula K. Le Guin, a selection at this year's Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: Zach Sun

Another aim for Thomas has been to help artists in creating and developing new works. So several years ago, he and his team created initiatives to support local creators. Two shows that went through this process will be showcased at the festival: "The Left Hand of Darkness," an adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's novel; and "Rhynoceron," inspired by the true story of what happened when a one-horned rhinoceros was brought to Renaissance Europe.

Another locally grown production — "The 4th Witch," a "Macbeth" riff from the stellar Chicago company Manual Cinema — will also make its local premiere.



"Rhynoceron," directed and designed by KT Shivak, photographed in New York, May 2025. Credit: Richard Termine

It will be hard to find tickets to those Chicago-grown shows, Thomas acknowledged.

“As they’re local, they’re very popular — those shows are the first to sell out,” he said. “We’ve added as many performances as we can.”

Read on for recommendations by Thomas about other shows, including two free shows that will tour to multiple locations. ([Find the full festival schedule here.](#)) “I advise people to show up at least a half an hour early” for the free shows, Thomas said.



Henrik Ibsen's "A Doll's House" is a selection at this year's Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: Johan Karlsson

### “Plexus Polaire’s A Doll’s House”

Merle Reskin Theatre, 60 E. Balbo Drive, South Loop

Jan. 22-24, details [here](#)

This adaptation of Henrik Ibsen’s classic play comes from the internationally acclaimed Plexus Polaire, a troupe of French and Norwegian performers who wowed Puppet Festival audiences with last year’s creepy “Dracula: Lucy’s Dream.”

Director Yngvild Aspeli “is one of the superstars of European puppetry, and she is playing Nora in this production,” Thomas said. “It’s incredible, unlike any Ibsen you’ve ever seen.”



Tian Gombau's "Stone by Stone" is one of the free neighborhood tour options in this year's Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: Tian Gombau

## Free Neighborhood Tour: “Stone by Stone”

Multiple locations, details [here](#)

Jan. 22–25

Creator Tian Gombau of Spain, who founded his own company in 1992, comes to town with his charming, internationally acclaimed 30-minute show, which will tour from Hermosa to Garfield Park to Old Town. Strikingly, the rest of the cast comprises not puppets but rocks, which Gombau imbues with personality.

“He is kind of a Mister Rogers magician — not flashy, but so powerful and sincere,” Thomas observed. “He’s a gift to the field.”



Alex and Olmstead’s “Happy Birthday, Mon Ami” is one of the free neighborhood tour options in this year’s Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: L Hewitt Photography

## Free Neighborhood Tour: “Happy Birthday, Mon Ami”

Multiple locations, details [here](#)

Jan. 28–Feb. 1

The winner of a 2024 Jim Henson Foundation grant, “Happy Birthday, Mon Ami” examines culture clashes when an American attends his cousin’s birthday party in Paris. Created by Maryland-based Alex & Olmsted, the show runs 60 minutes and will appear in five neighborhoods, ranging from Rogers Park to Austin to Woodlawn.

“This duo is such a delight,” Thomas said. “Great storytelling and really stellar performers.”



A production of "Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile" will take place at the Studebaker Theater during the Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: Danny Kaan

## "Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile"

Studebaker Theater (inside the Fine Arts Building), 410 S. Michigan Ave., the Loop

Opens Jan. 29, details [here](#)

The UK-based Roald Dahl Story Company adapts this picture book about a swamp dweller who hopes to eat some children but learns how to be compassionate. The first weekend's performances fall under the Puppet Festival aegis, but the company will stick around in the Loop for [an extended run](#) through Feb. 21.

"This fantastic piece for kids has a great musical score and puppets designed by the very highly regarded Toby Olié. Super-fun," Thomas said.



An image from "Oil Pressure Vibrator," a selection at this year's Chicago International Puppet Festival. Credit: Geumhyung Jeong

## **“Oil Pressure Vibrator”**

Chopin Theatre, 1543 W. Division St., Wicker Park

Jan. 30-31, details [here](#)

This oddball, one-woman show — a hybrid of lecture, film and performance — comes from South Korea’s Geumhyung Jeong.

“This is for adult audiences, and it’s our most experimental work, for those interested in that kind of thing,” Thomas said. “She’s trained as a dancer and as a puppeteer, and I’ve never seen anyone do what she’s able to do on stage as a solo performer. There’s no one like her.”



## Chicago hosts a festival entirely dedicated to puppetry—and you won't believe what it has in store

Now in its eighth year, the festival spans the provocative and the whimsical—featuring adult puppetry, a Roald Dahl-inspired showcase, free neighborhood tours and more.



**Written by Shannon Shreibak**

Things to Do Editor, Chicago

Tuesday January 20 2026



📷 Photograph: Vincent Arbelet | A still from 'Trust Me for a While.'

Since the dawn of time—or at least since someone first glued string to a wooden limb—puppetry has been one of the world's most polarizing art forms. Some find puppets downright adorable; others are still unpacking childhood trauma involving carved smiles and unblinking eyes. Chicago, however, has clearly chosen a side. The city's appetite for puppets is downright ravenous, which is why the [8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival](#) kicks off its 12-day takeover tomorrow, January 21.

Now presented annually, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival corrals puppeteers from across the globe, including artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, South Korea and Spain—and, of course, Chicago itself. The largest event of its kind in North America, the festival drew a record-breaking crowd last year, welcoming more than 22,000 attendees. These are people who willingly chose Chicago as a January travel destination, which tells you everything you need to know about the power of marionettes.

The 2026 festival spans 12 days and dozens of venues across the city, transforming Chicago into a global pageant of felt, foam, wood and ingenuity. Alongside ticketed performances, there are free shows, exhibits and the always-buzzing Puppet Hub—a cozy headquarters featuring the Spoke & Bird Pop-Up Café (serving coffee, tea, winter soups and baked goods), a Pop-Up Puppet Shop and two free exhibits perfect for lingering.



Photograph: Danny Kaan, Courtesy of Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival | A scene from 'Roald Dahl's The Enormous Crocodile.'

Programming runs the gamut from delightfully wholesome to wildly adult. The festival showcases a wide range of traditional and contemporary styles, from Japanese bunraku-inspired works and shadow puppetry to marionettes and object-based performances that make you reconsider what, exactly, constitutes a puppet.

For kids, a standout is *The Harlem Doll Palace*, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt—better known as Aunt Len—a Harlem public school art teacher who spent 40 years creating an extraordinary doll museum inside her brownstone. Another family favorite is Roald Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile*, a mischievous musical featuring a giant crocodile puppet that chomps through the scenery with unapologetic glee.

Adults, meanwhile, can head straight for *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, an impish, improvisational exploration of sex, humanity and the surprisingly deep underbelly of puppet eroticism. Also not to be missed is *Dead as a Dodo*, which opens the festival. Created by fan-favorite company Wakka Wakka, the mesmerizing musical follows a journey of survival, transformation and friendship—proving that even extinct birds can feel emotionally relatable when rendered in puppet form.

The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival runs January 21 through February 1, 2026, at venues throughout the city. Tickets are on sale now [here](#).

# HYDE PARK HERALD

## PUPPET FEST, WINE TASTING AND SPEED DATING: THIS WEEK'S HYDE PARK HAPPENINGS

Herald staff report Jan 21, 2026 Updated 17 hrs ago 0



Stoff Scherr, Shoshana Bass and Ben Hemmendinger tell "The Brave Little Tailor" through puppetry during a Sandglass Theater and Doppleskope production of "The Amazing Story Machine" at Experimental Station, 6100 S. Blackstone Ave., Jan. 24, 2025. Marc C. Monaghan

Here's what's going on in and around Hyde Park this week.

### January 22

**'The Harlem Doll Palace' puppet performance:** As part of the 2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, Alva Puppet Theatre presents The Harlem Doll Palace at the Logan Center. Based on the true story of collector, historian, and educator Lenon Holder Hoyte, known as "Aunt Len," the show depicts Aunt Len's story as a Harlem schoolteacher who transformed her brownstone into a doll museum, with puppets from her "dollection" recreating their journeys and fighting to keep her legacy alive as the neighborhood changes around them. *Thursday, January 22 and Friday, January 23, 4 p.m. and 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, January 24, 6 p.m. Logan Center, Theater East, 915 E. 60th St. Tickets \$43; \$35 for students and seniors. [logancenter.uchicago.edu/programs](https://logancenter.uchicago.edu/programs)*



# Top Chicago Events For The Rest Of Winter 2026

by Ben Lalez | Jan 21, 2026 | Lifestyle, Real Estate



Yes, we're still thick in the middle of winter, but doesn't it feel like we've turned the corner at least a little bit now that we're into the new calendar year? And if you're someone who doesn't enjoy traditional winter activities like skiing or snowboarding, you're probably counting the days until spring arrives.

The good news is that there are still plenty of things happening around Chicago to make the rest of winter feel a little less long. From food-focused events and cultural festivals to live performances and major sporting events, there's no shortage of ways to get out of the house before winter officially wraps up on March 20.

In this article, we've rounded up some of the most interesting events happening in Chicago for the remainder of winter 2026. Each event includes dates and a brief overview of what you can expect, along with links for more details if you plan to attend.

If this is your first time here, we're the Ben Lalez Team. We've been selling real estate in Chicago for a long time, and staying connected to what's happening across the city is part of how we serve our clients.

We hope you find something on this list that helps make the rest of the snowy season more enjoyable!

## Events At A Quick Glance

Date Range	Event	Neighborhood Focus
Jan 21 – Feb 1	Puppet Theater Festival	Citywide venues
Jan 23 – Feb 8	Restaurant Week	Hyde Park, Lakeview, River North, West Loop

## January 2026

### Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival (Jan 21 – Feb 1)

This festival brings together puppet companies from Chicago and around the world for nearly two weeks of performances. Shows take place at multiple venues across the city, including theaters, cultural centers, and community spaces. Expect a mix of traditional puppetry, modern interpretations, and experimental performances, many of which are designed for adults rather than just kids. You can find more information at the [Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival website](#).



# Chicago on the Cheap

Your local resource for freebies, discounts and deals

## Free Black History Concert at Auditorium Theatre

POSTED BY  
Rosalind Cummings-Yeates

Experience the musical journey of the Black Diaspora during the thrilling Black History Month concert series: "[Black History Concert Series: Voices of 'Ase: Afrofuturism II](#)" by Uniting Voices Choir on **February 24, 2026**.

### Discover more Fun

**Wednesday, January 21, 2026**

#### Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

11:00 am to 9:30 pm | **FREE** | Fine Arts Building

*Continues by date...*

## Dead as a Dodo

Kevin Curran January 21, 2026 Reviews No Comments



The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival kicked off its 8th season with a jaw dropping production at the Studebaker Theater in the Fine Arts Building tonight. *Dead as a Dodo*, a production from Norwegian/US theater company Wakka Wakka, tells the story of a skeleton boy and his best friend, a skeleton dodo. If the other 100+ events scheduled over the next twelve days are half as good as the show we saw tonight, you simply have to see as many of them as you can.



I was joined by my friend Gino, who coauthored our review of Charles Dickens *Begrudgingly Presents A Christmas Carol Again*. I was especially excited to see this with him because he loves puppets more than anyone I know, and because *Dead as a Dodo* is exactly the kind of puppet theater that hits our favorite sweet spot: childhood whimsy paired with adult frankness. It's authentic and familiar. It's unapologetically unserious, but it's not laughing at you, it's laughing with you. It invites you in.

That invitation is a big part of what I love about puppetry; the storytelling is so direct. We all know it's puppeteers in body suits and creatures made of cloth and foam, but that doesn't diminish how effective it is to see those creatures come to life. I think it's actually the opposite. I have to agree with the puppeteer that this is a real living thing, and that small act of participation pulls me into the story. In a way, it's closest you get as an adult to listening to your parent read you a story and do the voices. Both the puppeteer and I are using our imaginations to give the

puppet life, and I think it becomes more emotionally effective than even the most technically proficient computer generated image.

From a technical standpoint, the show is a triumph. One scene transition, which I won't spoil the details of here, happened so quickly and was so dazzling that the audience spontaneously broke out into applause. The variety of creatures was also an incredible feat, even more so because each was so thoroughly brought to life by the puppeteers.

Part of that “brought to life” feeling is the movement. The portrayal of character locomotion is so precise and expressive you stop noticing the mechanics and start tracking intention, fear, curiosity, joy. Even the object work is spellbinding: the weight, momentum, and snap of things whipping and tumbling across the stage feel uncannily real. Watching it, you’re not thinking about technique. You’re thinking about physics, emotion, and wonder, which is exactly the point.

Thor Gunnar Thorvaldsson’s original music was fun, catchy, and kind of burst into the world like: *aw yeah, song time*. I was grooving in my seat, and I’m not exaggerating when I say I was singing “gotta get down to get up” in the car on the ride home.

I also love family-friendly theater than can be appropriate for kids without talking down to them. The main character is clearly a child, but the show never makes him twee or too cutesy. He’s scared and brave and excited by turns, I felt those feelings along with him. The world is huge seen through his eyes, not simple or small.

More than anything, what came through loud and clear throughout the show was how much fun the creators were having. It was clear this show sprang from their sense of play and experimentation. We were being invited into that, and it was truly a magical experience.

This show is running through Saturday, January 24th, and we strongly encourage you to see it. The festival runs through the first of February and skimming the list, there are literally dozens of shows to choose from. We hope to see you there.

Highly Recommended

Reviewed by Kevin Curran and Gino Generelli

Presented through January 24th at the Studebaker Theater at the Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan, Chicago. The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival runs through February 1st at multiple venues throughout the city.

Tickets for this and other shows in the festival can be found [here](#).

Additional information about this and other area productions can be found by visiting [www.theatreinchicago.com](http://www.theatreinchicago.com).



## Review: DEAD AS A DODO A SPELLBINDING DELIGHT at Studebaker Theater At The Fine Arts Building

The musical is a highlight of the 8th Annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

By: Misha Davenport Jan. 22, 2026



The 8th AnnChicago International Puppet Theater Festival kicked off with a bang, thanks to Wakka Wakka's production of *DEAD AS A DODO*, a visually stunning and absolutely heartfelt piece of theater.

Co-written and directed by [Gwendolyn Warnock](#) and [Kirjan Waage](#) (with credit also given to [The Ensemble Company](#)), this creative, 80-minute show plays through Jan. 25 at the historic Studebaker Theater in the Fine Arts Building (410 S. Michigan).

Set in the underworld in the post-apocalyptic future, the plot concerns the unlikely friendship between a skeleton boy and a skeleton dodo. At the start of the musical, the boy is literally beginning to lose pieces of himself as the pair scavenge for any replacement parts

"When you vanish, will you forget everyone you love," the boy ponders his pending fate early on. It's a selfless statement; he is more concerned about forgetting rather than being forgotten. . It's an interesting take on grief from the perspective of the deceased.

AD

The surface world has been destroyed, leaving "nothing but the bones." This suits Bone King (essentially death) just fine. He and his daughter lord over the underworld, hoarding lost bones.

While the plot is logical in terms of the traditional heroes journey, its execution takes you in places that are unpredictable and exciting. When the dodo begins to grow feathers, skin and muscle (a resurrective act that begins to weaken the Bone King, threatening his power), the two best friends set off on a journey through the underworld that leads them through the River Styx, a realm of monsters and other fantastical places.

In addition to the boney main characters, Waage's surreal puppet designs include a florescent whale that eats lava rocks and woolly mammoth.

Costumes (also by Warnock and Waage) have the puppeteers cleverly concealed in a glittery fabric that makes the eight-person ensemble shimmer like stars (perhaps a nod to the fact that we –like the creatures they move and speak through—are all born out of stardust).

Projection design by Erato Tzavar suggest not only set, but movement, weather and something magical (no spoilers). The lighting design by Daphne Agosin ([Scott Monnin](#) is credited for the tour based on Agosin's original ideas) makes use of both light and shadow to create an immersive world in which the puppets are in the spotlight (and their human puppeteers blend in seamlessly).

Chicago has always had a soft spot for puppetry, going back to the early days of television when [Burr Tillstrom](#) first brought the artform into American homes with "Kukla, Fran and Ollie." Programming like DAAD, along with the 100 events scheduled through Feb. 1 throughout the city is a fine testament to Chicago's commitment to preserve, promote and elevate this artform.. These including two shows being presented in various neighborhoods free of charge: STONE BY STONE from Spain and HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MON AMI (see <https://chicagopuppetfest.org/2026-free-neighborhood-tour/> for information on these free events suitable for all ages).

Photo by Erato Tzavara, courtesy of Wakka Wakka.



## Your Chicago Curated Weekend: 1/22 and Beyond

JULIAN RAMIREZ / JANUARY 22, 2026 / FRONT PAGE

It's going to be an extremely cold weekend ahead of us with temperatures dipping well below zero! So while there are plenty of events going on (like the start of Chicago Restaurant Week and the International Puppet Theatre Festival), remember to stay safe and bundle up!

Let's get on with your curated weekend!



1/21/2026 to 2/1/2026

## Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

Multiple Venues  
Multiple locations  
Chicago

 [Add to My ChicagoKids.com  
Personal Planner](#)

[Visit Web Site](#)

The 2026 Chicago Puppet Fest will span 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, presenting an international pageant of puppet artists sharing more than 100 puppetry activities. Get ready for spectacular shows in landmark theaters, intimate works on smaller stages, the always popular late night puppet cabarets, and a long list of free puppet events happening all over the city. Shows often sell out so don't delay!

**Time:** See web site for schedule

**Cost:**

**Ages:** All ages



# THE JIM HENSON FOUNDATION

37-18 Northern Blvd. Suite 400, Long Island City, NY 11101  
[www.hensonfoundation.org](http://www.hensonfoundation.org)

January 23, 2026

## Puppet Happenings Newsletter

### PERFORMANCES - NATIONAL

#### **Dead as a Dodo \* - Wakka Wakka**

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[The Studebaker Theatre](#) - 410 S Michigan Ave Chicago, IL



**January 21 - 25**

See website for performance times

Dead as a Dodo raucously takes us deep within the underworld, where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, concerned about disappearing completely, notice something peculiar: the Dodo is miraculously sprouting feathers! A wave of transformation begins, shattering the established order of the dead. The two friends must flee, fighting to stay together as they are drawn into the heart of an epic battle between life and death.

\* Recipient of a Jim Henson Foundation Presenters Grant (2025)

#### **The 4th Witch \* - Manual Cinema**

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[The Biograph's Začek-McVay Mainstage](#) - 2433 N Lincoln Ave Chicago, IL



**January 22 - 25**

See website for performance times

A new and fantastic tale from Chicago's Manual Cinema, inspired by elements of Shakespeare's Macbeth, in which a girl escapes war and flees into a dark forest. Told through shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music, without dialogue or narration, The 4th Witch begins on the eve of an invasion of a small town by the local warlord, Macbeth. The girl flees into the nearby forest, where, orphaned and exiled, she is rescued by a witch, who adopts her as an apprentice. As the girl becomes more skilled in witchcraft, her grief and rage draw her into a nightmarish quest for vengeance against the warlord who killed her parents: Macbeth.

\* Recipient of a Jim Henson Foundation Production Grant (2025)

## Harlem Doll Palace \* - Alva Puppet Theater

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts - 915 E 60th St Chicago, IL](#)



**January 22 - 24**

Thursday & Friday at 4pm and 7:30pm

Saturday at 6pm

Welcome to The Harlem Doll Palace, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone. Join the dolls from the "dollection" inside Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum as they recreate their journeys to the museum and seek to keep its beloved founder alive while Harlem deteriorates around her.

\* Recipient of a Jim Henson Foundation Production Grant (2024) and Workshop Grant (2023)

## The Left Hand of Darkness \* - Untitled Theatre Company No. 61 and Yara Arts Group

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[Wirtz Center Chicago Abbott Hall - 710 N Lakeshore Dr Chicago, IL](#)



**January 29 - February 1**

See website for performance times

The Left Hand of Darkness is a new work based on the 1969 novel by famed sci-fi author Ursula K. Le Guin, wherein a lone human emissary to an alien world tries to facilitate inclusion in a growing intergalactic civilization. To do so he must bridge the gulf between his own views and those of the newly encountered, completely dissimilar culture whose inhabitants spend most of their time without a gender.

\* Recipient of a Jim Henson Foundation Workshop Grant (2024)

## A Doll's House - Plexus Polaire

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[DePaul's Merle Reskin Theatre - 60 El Balbo Dr Chicago, IL](#)



**January 22 - 24**

See website for performance times

Plunge into a world on the edge of the fantastic, where the heroine is a prisoner of her own web of lies, woven over many years. A Doll's House brings together puppets, actors, music and video projections in this eerie retelling of Henrik Ibsen's 1879 play, one of the great Nordic classics. Created by and starring artistic director Yngvild Aspeli, the production features one female and one male actor-puppeteer in a house haunted by hyper-realistic, life-sized puppets, dead birds and a possessed female choir. Nora, the main character, experiences a collision with her own reality, akin to a bird hitting an invisible barrier.

## Free neighborhood tour with Tian Gombau

2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[Various Venues](#) - Chicago, IL



**January 22 - 25**

**See website for details**

Spanish puppet artist Tian Gombau was walking barefoot on the beach one day when he suddenly realized there are so many stones on earth. He started to classify them and keep them as precious treasures, thinking, if you look at what's inside them, one realizes there is something more than just a stone. The result is an ingenious, endearing, 30-minute imagination-awakening experience for children using only inanimate objects.

## FESTIVALS

### Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

[Various Venues](#)



**January 21 - February 1, 2026**

**Tickets on Sale Now**

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is the largest event dedicated to the artform in the U.S. In the heart of winter, the Festival spans 12 days and dozens of Chicago venues, sharing 100+ puppetry activities with 14,000+ guests. The Festival includes performances, symposium, Catapult artist intensive, workshops, the Free Neighborhood Tour, and more.



## DEAN'S LIST

# Dean's Weekender: Aziz Ansari, Martin Lawrence, Disney On Ice and more

by: [Dean Richards](#)

Posted: Jan 23, 2026 / 12:55 PM CST

Updated: Jan 23, 2026 / 12:55 PM CST

CHICAGO — WGN's Dean Richards is offering a look at some of the shows and events taking place around Chicagoland this weekend.

The 8th Annual [Chicago International Puppet Festival](#) is now playing on stages around the city with over 100 productions over 12 days. Catch the action through Feb. 1.

WEEKEND GUIDE

## Festival Friday with Diane Pathieu



By [Diane Pathieu](#)

Friday, January 23, 2026 6:32AM



Each week, we list some events you can attend over the weekend.

CHICAGO (WLS) -- There are lots of fun events to check out indoors!

The Andersonville Chamber of Commerce will hold its first Explore and Restore: A Health, Wellness, and Service Open House.

The wellness event will teach residents aspects of holistic well-being, home design, financial planning, and more. dozens of local businesses are offering free services.

The 2026 Chicago Puppet Fest will take over the city for 12 days across dozens of venues, showcasing an international lineup of puppet artists and more than 100 performances and events.

The festival features everything from large-scale productions in landmark theaters to intimate shows on smaller stages, along with fan-favorite late-night puppet cabarets and a wide range of free puppet events happening throughout Chicago.

Hot Wheels Monster Trucks Live: Glow-N-Fire roars into NOW Arena in Hoffman Estates this weekend bringing a bigger-than-ever weekend of high-octane family entertainment, including the world debut of the all-new Rhinomite truck, explosive new stunts, and the never-before-seen No-Handed Front Flip by FMX riders.



# “8th Annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival” reviewed by Julia W. Rath

## CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL

CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL  
PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL

\*\*\*\*\* The wizardry of puppetry has come to Chicago once again! The 8th Annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival is being held in and around the Chicago area through February 1st. For twelve straight days, over 100 shows and special events will showcase creative puppets from diverse countries and cultures, highlighting the unique talents of local, national, and international puppet artists. These presentations take place at various venues, on different dates and times. Please check the online schedule at

<https://chicagopuppetfest.org/> for detailed information about the various programs and how to purchase tickets for all events.



Opening night Wednesday, January 21st featured "Dead as a Dodo", created by fan favorite Wakka Wakka, a combination Norwegian and New York visual theater company. The program took place at the Studebaker Theatre, in the Fine Arts Building, and was the fastest ninety minutes that I can ever remember! "Dead as a Dodo" takes place in the underworld, "where two skeleton friends, a Dodo and a boy, concerned about disappearing completely, notice something peculiar: the Dodo is miraculously sprouting feathers!" While the boy is especially concerned about losing his bones, Dodo is on the hunt to help his disintegrating friend obtain more of them. But so many others want these bones too! This is a dark comedy with superb lighting and visual effects, providing a feeling of motion throughout. I especially liked seeing the images of waves and what it means to be underwater! Most amazing is the lighted fish that consumes both the Dodo and the boy under orders from his master to save them. Singing and sound effects only add to the illusion. The sparkling black costumes, worn by the puppeteers, nicely blend into the background, such that the puppets seem to act on their own. As a consequence, the audience is drawn more and more into the story.



"Dead as a Dodo", commissioned by the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, runs through Sunday, January 25th at the Studebaker Theatre, 410 S. Michigan Avenue.

General admission tickets: \$48.

Students and seniors: \$40.



Performance schedule:

Friday, January 23 – 7:30 p.m.

Saturday, January 24 – 2:00 p.m. and  
7:30 p.m.

Sunday, January 25 – 2:00 p.m.

Other shows in the festival include a diverse range of classic and contemporary puppetry styles from around the world, created by puppet artists from England, France, Norway, Denmark, India, Scotland, South Korea and Spain, as well as the United States, not to mention, Chicago. Each of these showcase different forms of traditional and contemporary puppet styles, from bunraku-style to shadow puppetry, marionettes to object-based works.



Most events range from \$35 to \$125, depending on venue, time, date, seat location, type of show, and whether one is an adult, student, or senior. There are also a few free book talks. Short films are \$20 for adults; \$15 for students and seniors.

Note that some venues may not be ADA accessible.

Visit <http://chicagopuppetfest.org> for tickets and information about a set of performances where innovative puppeteers meet up with creative inspiration.

To see what others are saying, visit [www.theatreinchicago.com](http://www.theatreinchicago.com), go to Review Round-Up and click at "Chicago Puppet Theater Festival"



Friday, January 23, 2026

---

**REVIEW: The Harlem Doll Palace at The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival Now Playing Through January 4, 2026**

*Chill Live Shows On Our Radar*

***Alva Puppet Theater: The Harlem Doll Palace***



**REVIEW:**

*By Bonnie Kenaz-Mara*

Don't let the demure looking tea party fool you. This show is full of harrowing true life tales of a contemporary break in, a theft, an assault, a flood, and generational family trauma dating back to the days of legalized slavery. It's also full of endurance, joy, famous visitors, and a passion for collecting thousands of valuable, historical dolls that borders on obsession. Welcome to The Harlem Doll Palace, based on the true story of Lenon Holder Hoyt, better known as Aunt Len, a public school art teacher for 40 years who created a doll museum in her Harlem brownstone.



We're huge fans of stories about interesting people and are so happy the story of Aunt Len and her passion project is being preserved. We weren't expecting the wonderful contemporary songs and the depth and breadth this historical puppet piece covers. Framing her story as a puppet show and anthropomorphizing her collection is strongly effective storytelling. We found this show not only informative, but entertaining as well, with strongly positive social justice, black, and queer elements. Highly recommended.

*Bonnie is a Chicago based writer, theatre critic, photographer, artist, and Mama to 2 amazing adults. She owns two websites where she publishes frequently: [ChilLiveShows.com](http://ChilLiveShows.com) (adult) & [ChilMama.com](http://ChilMama.com) (family friendly).*



*Chicago Puppet Fest and Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts at the University of Chicago present:*

## ***Alva Puppet Theater: The Harlem Doll Palace***

Join the dolls from the "dollection" inside Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum as they recreate their journeys to the museum and seek to keep its beloved founder alive while Harlem deteriorates around her.

### ***Event Details***

#### ***Dates/Times:***

***Thursday, January 22 at 4 p.m.***

***Thursday, January 22 at 7:30 p.m.***

***Friday, January 23 at 4 p.m.***

***Friday, January 23 at 7:30 p.m.***

***Saturday, January 24 at 6 p.m.***

#### ***Location:***

***Reva & David Logan Center for the Arts, Theater East, UChicago  
915 E. 60th St.***

#### ***Cost:***

***\$43 Regular***

***\$35 Students and Seniors***

***Ages: 10 and up***

***Running Time: 80 mins***

***[Click here for video and full details.](#)***



Friday, January 23, 2026

**REVIEW: Laura Heit: The Matchbox Shows Now Playing Through January 25th, 2026**

*Chil Live Shows On Our Radar*  
*Chicago Puppet Fest presents:*  
**Laura Heit: The Matchbox Shows**



**Laura Heit's unmatched!**

We adored this wonderfully weird production. Think that late night, tiny, tabletop puppet fun might be your jam? This show has fire, wind, human created foley noises, and even puppet porn worthy of a 12 year old boy in a bathroom stall. She even becomes her own sequined backdrop with a delightful interplay of light, motion, and projection.

Portland, Oregon based Heit has 25 years of practice making miniature magic and has perfected her niche craft in a big way. Not one to be boxed in, this microcosm contains dreams, odd stories, and wickedly creative, delightful absurd scenarios. The art is so bad it's good. And her DIY vibe is also inspiring and makes me want to go home and make an entire mini world of oddities in the service of storytelling. Worth the admission price to see the teeny news helicopter with the pinwheel propellor! Recommended.

Laura Heit also has two nights of shorts playing at Music Box Theatre, which I was unable to get press tickets to review, and a free looping exhibition on the 4th floor of The Fine Arts Building which we loved. Check her out.

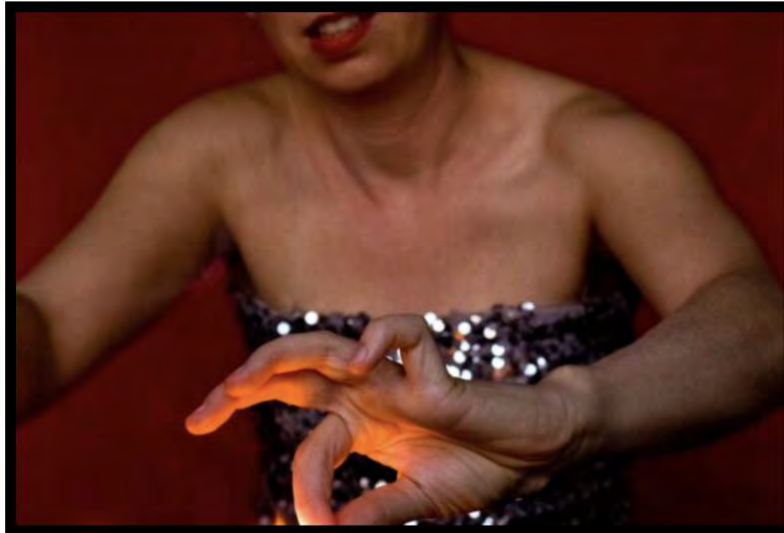
**Exhibitions at The Puppet Hub**  
**"Two Ways Down" by Laura Heit**

An immersive shadow puppet and hand-drawn animated installation, by visiting puppet artist Laura Heit. Taking inspiration from the Hieronymus Bosch work, Garden of Earthly Delights, this fantastical piece reflects on the momentary nature of life using thrown shadows from tabletop dioramas and reflected and refracted animated projections to create a fleeting world where human-animal hybrids, specters, and body parts morph and flit across the walls.



**Laura Heit: The Matchbox Shows**  
**\* 25th Anniversary of The Matchbox Shows \***

Laura Heit walks on stage with a glass of wine wearing a sequined tube top. She takes her place behind a table and begins to bring to life her miniature cabaret. Playing the part of Miniature raconteur, sequined pyromaniac, Laura Heit performs teeny tiny puppet shows inside matchboxes.



A dead boyfriend, a sausage fairy, a tiger whisperer, a perfectionist, a bath-loving ghost, and many others play their parts in these uncanny micro plays. The miniature stages come to life with crankies, fire, and pop-up paper engineering. The puppet shows are simultaneously projected on a screen behind the table making the little tiny details of this portable variety show larger than life.

**Event Details**

**Dates/Times:**

Thursday, January 22 at 8 p.m.  
Thursday, January 22 at 10 p.m.  
Friday, January 23 at 8 p.m.  
Friday, January 23 at 10 p.m.  
Saturday, January 24 at 8 p.m.  
Saturday, January 24 at 10 p.m.  
Sunday, January 25 at 8 p.m.

**Location:**

Constellation  
3111 N. Western Ave.

**Cost:**

\$25 Regular  
\$20 Students and Seniors

**Ages: 13 and up**

Running Time: 50 mins





DEAN RICHARDS' SUNDAY MORNING

## Dean Richards' Sunday Morning | January 25

by: [Eli Berk](#)

Posted: Jan 25, 2026 / 02:14 PM CST

Updated: Jan 25, 2026 / 02:14 PM CST



WGN's Dean Richards

### FF to 1:05:10 for Blair's interview 1.25.26, 10:50-10:55 am

Dean Richards, Dave Schwan and Tony DeNardis start the show discussing the snowfall and how they plan to spend their Sundays now that the Bears are eliminated from the NFL playoffs.

City of Chicago Streets and Sanitation Commissioner Cole Stallard joins Dean to talk about the condition of the city streets after the latest snowfall.

For today's Far Flung Forecast, Dave takes us out to Chamonix, France.

Dr. Santina Wheat, Program Director, McGaw Northwestern Family Medicine Residency Northwestern Medicine, Delnor Hospital, joins Dean for this week's health update. They talk about safety measures for the extreme cold and snow, give updates about the super flu and take listener questions.

WGN-TV weather producer Bill Snyder joins Dean to give updates on the snowfall and how the rest of the country has been affected.

For *This Week in Theatre*, Dean talks all things children's theatre! First, he talks with Ahmed Abdullahi Gallab, the music composer of Roald Dahl's *The Enormous Crocodile*, which will be showing at the Studebaker Theater. For tickets, visit the [Fine Arts Building](#).

On this week's *Food Time*, Dean shares a recipe for cabbage rolls and gathers cold weather recipes.





### Description

**Stereophonic**, the most Tony award nominated play ever, has arrived in Chicago! It's a homecoming for one of the stars of the show **Emilie Kouatchou**, who plays Holly. Andrea talks to Emilie about growing up in Palatine, performing on stage at Fremd High School, studying at Northwestern and what it means to be performing in one of the most celebrated "plays with music" in history! Stereophonic runs 1/27-2/8 at the CIBC Theatre. Tickets: [BroadwayinChicago.com](https://BroadwayinChicago.com)

The most anticipated culinary event of the year, **Chicago Restaurant Week** is finally here! 17 days, more than 500 participating restaurants in Chicago and the suburbs, all offering prix fixe brunches, lunches and dinners where you can sample some of the best food in the country for exceptional prices! **Choose Chicago's VP of Partnerships Jordan Engerman** joins Andrea to talk about this incredible week for all foodies, celebrating its 19th year! Information: [choosechicago.com](https://choosechicago.com)

**The Boat Show** is back in Rosemont, celebrating its 94th show! Andrea talks to **Show Manager Jeff Marquard** about sailboats, speedboats, pontoons and everything in between. Jeff talks about new brands & models, new products and cruisers! Plus there are interactive displays featuring trout fishing for kids, a paddle fest pool, a surfing simulator, and bumper boats! The Boat Show is at the Stephens Convention Center from January 28-February 1st. Info: [Chicagoboatshow.com](https://Chicagoboatshow.com)



Next, **Chicago International Puppet Theatre Festival** continues at various locations throughout Chicago. **Director Sandy Gerding** talks to Andrea about the 8th annual festival, which features 100 events over 12 days, at landmark theatres, intimate works on smaller stages, the late night puppet cabarets and a long list of free puppet events all over the city. The festival runs through February 1st. Tickets and information: [chicagopuppetfest.org](https://chicagopuppetfest.org)

And, it's a "New Year, New Hue" at the **Color Factory in Chicago**. To celebrate, they're hosting a special night on Sunday January 25th, where guests can come and experience 14 colorful rooms featuring interactive installations and collaborations from around the world. Color Factory's **Lorena Mendez** tells Andrea there will be an aura reader on site, taking portraits and offering insightful interpretations for the new year! Information: [colorfactory.co](https://colorfactory.co)



**Blair Thomas live, 10-minute Zoom interview from the Puppet Hub  
1/31/26 10:35 a.m.**



## **Chicago puppet festival provides fun from around the world | Chicago Live**

The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival begins this month and provides fun for families and people of all ages.

Posted January 31, 2026 11:52am CST | [↗](#)

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, January 26, 2026

Good afternoon.

If you ever want an example of how much difference a superb sound design makes to a show, go and see **"Birds of North America"** at A Red Orchid Theatre and listen to the gorgeous work of Ethan Korvne. There are a lot of other reasons to see this deeply moving, four-star show, too.

The **Chicago International Puppet Festival** is underway and attracting packed houses. So far, I've caught the new Manual Cinema show, "The 4th Witch," and I'm headed tonight to see "Sex Lives of Puppets." The fest has brought the Biograph Theatre back to life. Weirdly, though, we all stumbled into the Manual Cinema show there late last week in the dark; no one had turned the marquee on, which has been blazing when the theater has been empty. I thought I'd gone to the wrong theater (which would not be the first time).



*"The 4th Witch" by the Chicago-based company Manual Cinema. (Katie Doyle)*



# From the Editor

**PIR Volume 3 No. 1. Winter 2026**

*Puppetry International Research* is not only committed to publishing strong scholarship in puppetry and related arts, but also to helping develop the field of puppetry scholarship generally, not least of all by mentoring researchers and writers—some coming to this material for the first time—through our editorial process. The Focus Section in this issue of *PIR*, guest edited by Ana Díaz Barriga and Paulette Richards, “Puppet Dramaturgy, As Seen in the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival,” takes this mentorship process to the next level. As Díaz Barriga and Richards share in their Introduction to the section, the articles included here developed out of reviews initially written for the 2025 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival archive. The authors subsequently worked with Díaz Barriga, and each other, workshopping their writing over several months. Their pieces were also given peer-reviews by both scholars and artists. Throughout the process, they researched, wrote, and received valuable feedback within a supportive community, deepening and expanding their initial reviews into the robust scholarly articles presented here. The results amplify the importance of such mentorship and community writing models as well as the direct connections that exist and can continue to be fortified between puppetry practice/performance and critical analysis. The section’s four strong analytical essays—from Jesse Njus, Skye Strauss, Katherine McNamara, and Opalanietet—as well as an interview from JEM (Joelle Estelle Mendoza), in conversation with Amethyst First Rider and Peter Balkwill, cast new light on the amazing offerings of the Chicago festival while supporting the voices of these contributors.

I am, as always, deeply grateful to the *PIR* team for all the work they do for the journal, as well as to this issue’s review board. Each member generously shared their time and expertise, reviewing articles and providing feedback. Our journal thrives because of the continued dedication of people in the puppetry community who unstintingly support each other’s endeavors.

*Claudia Orenstein*

Hunter College and the Graduate Center, CUNY



Nasty, Brutish, and Short. Photo by Phil Monjaro.

## Dispatch: International Puppet Theater Festival Launches With Innovative Shows Performed by Puppeteer Teams and Solos

THIRD COAST REVIEW STAFF / JANUARY 26, 2026 / PUPPET THEATER, REVIEW, STAGES, THEATER FESTIVAL

It's the first week of the 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival and this is our first dispatch with brief reviews of some of the shows we've seen so far. From skeletons to shadow puppets and matchboxes, the productions display the amazing ingenuity of puppetry storytelling and the great variety of puppet characters that we meet. The puppet stories are powerful dramas, comedies and musicals, some for all ages, some definitely not for kids.

The 12 days of the puppet fest, which continue through Sunday, February 1, feature performances at 14 theater venues all over the city, plus free puppet productions at 10 Chicago neighborhood locations, such as parks and community centers from Rogers Park to Grand Crossing, from Old Town to Austin. See our [preview](#) of the festival and watch for our second dispatch next week. Find complete information and buy tickets [here](#).



Dead as a Dodo. Photo by Chuncheon.

## ***Dead as a Dodo (Norway/New York)***

This beautifully designed and engineered performance was the festival's opening night production at the Studebaker Theater. (I saw it several days later.) *Dead as a Dodo* by **Wakka Wakka** tells a story of survival, transformation and friendship. Living deep in the underworld, two skeletons—the Dodo and the Boy—are fearful they will wither away as the Boy begins to lose limbs. But suddenly, a miracle happens. The Dodo begins to grow feathers and flesh; it's on its way to becoming a fully fleshed and feathered creature again.

This full transformation only happens after the Boy and the Dodo, trying to stay together, finally are able to flee the underworld and its devilish denizens—many gorgeous colorful devil characters, including the King of the Underworld. Ultimately, a chorus of puppets performs a syncopated song with the refrain, "You have to go down to get up!" The show's final words are "The Age of the Dodo has begun."

Some brilliant puppet plays are produced and performed by one or two designers and puppeteers. (As in *The Matchbox Shows* below.) *Dead as a Dodo* is a group effort with thrilling, constantly changing projections (by Erato Tzavara) and lighting design (by Daphne Ogosin), plus eight puppeteers fully garbed in black sparkly fabric. (Yes, you might think you see them but you really don't; on the darkened stage, only the puppets are illuminated.)

*Dead as a Dodo* is written and directed by Gwendolyn Warnock and Kirjan Waage (with help from the ensemble). Waage creates and constructs the puppets. Original music and sound design is by Thor Gunnar Thorvaldsson. (Nancy S Bishop)



*Rhynoceron*. Photo by Richard Termine.

Acclaimed Chicago sculptor and puppeteer KT Shvak's contribution to the festival is a mystical display of uncanny arts. *Rhynoceron*, based on a true story, follows a Renaissance-era one-horned rhinoceros traded among a sultan, king, and pope. Presented in one glorious hour at the Biograph Theater, the show splits into two parts, the first focusing on the human point of view and the second on the animal.

During the human segment, our four talented puppeteers recreate historical figures through a combination of masks, illustrations, table top puppets, and body puppets. For each historical figure we get a monologue, either from the figure himself or someone who knew him, about how they acquired the rhino, their impressions of it, and why they choose to send it away. While the character designs and puppet performances are strong, this half, more than the second, is clunky.

The show is at its best when it achieves a certain magical quality. Ben Zucker provides onstage accompaniment, and his xylophone and synth devices go a long way to creating a floaty, arcane vibe. Several times during the human monologues, however, I was separated from that environment. Some puppets spoke with modern language, and the occasional dips into anachronisms, I thought, were like memes drawn on frescos.

The second half, when we finally meet the rhino talked about so much in the first, is an absolute revelation. The rhino, operated by two or three people, is one of the coolest puppets in the city. The life-sized creature moves with believable grace and weight. Watching the animal characters, I experienced that amazing double-vision we so want from a puppet show, where we can see the strings but for a moment cannot doubt the thing onstage is alive. The kind of feeling one wishes they could bottle. (Adam Kaz)



*The Matchbox Shows. Photo by Sean Meredith.*

## The Matchbox Shows (Portland, Oregon)

On frigid Friday, January 23, Portland-based [Laura Heit](#) celebrated the 25th anniversary of *The Matchbox Shows*, which debuted at Links Hall in 2000. Heit received her BFA from the Art Institute (MFA in London) and was also an intern for Puppet Fest founder Blair Thomas's Redmoon Theater. The performance was at Constellation in Avondale

Written, designed and created by Heit, this hourlong show is a mini-marvel of mostly-autobiographical vignettes using real matchbooks, some actual flame, and tiny figures (mostly metal to survive that flame) marionetted by matchstick, reminiscent of [Lynda Barry's](#) people and sometimes [Edward Gorey's](#) milieu. Camera operator Sam Deutsch follows the miniature action with a tiny camera that projects the sketches on a large upstage screen.

Wearing a sequined blue top (to provide a glittery scrim behind the action), carrying a glass of red wine (to fuel the confessions), and speaking quiet, conversational tones into her face-mounted microphone, Heit spins tales of ballerinas, circus actors and animals, Little Red Riding Hood, and much more using simple stick puppetry techniques, along with more elaborate flips and reveals, sometimes using scrolls and multiple dimensions. The stories range from sweet to bittersweet to sad, all revealed with quiet humor and reflection.

This palm-sized play, which regularly rotates material, also employs clever callbacks from previous sequences, and is sometimes quite meta: a wee art history slide show shows students seated on floor cushions, in front of some patrons on floor cushions in the almost sold-out proscenium space. Minneapolis pops up with Bob Mould in the preshow music and Prince in a clever, multi-layered and appropriately reverential reveal.

Heit's final sketch is "27 Pictures of Myself Naked," a tiny compendium of herself nude and welding, on a pommel horse, on a landline and a Zoom call, and more. The show shares remarkable skill to create such mobile and expressive Lilliputian players, and a meditative sweetness about our collections of life experiences from this rich little match girl. Heit's short films will play at the Music Box Theatre on January 26-27. ([Karin McKie](#))



*The 4th Witch. Photo courtesy Puppet Theater Festival.*

## ***The 4th Witch (Chicago)***

Manual Cinema's contribution to the 2026 International Puppet Theater Festival is *The 4th Witch*, conceived and directed by Drew Dir. The production draws on key elements of *Macbeth* and focuses on the three witches in Birnam Wood.

*The 4th Witch* takes place during the occupation of Paris during wartime, with General Macbeth aiming to be king or dictator. Bombs fall on the Trois Oiseaux Cafe, killing the owners and orphaning a little girl. She escapes to Birnam Wood and is rescued by a witch. Each Manual Cinema production uses different types of technology. *The 4th Witch* is performed using shadow puppets and actors in silhouette with overhead projectors. Lovely, colorful slides of mushrooms and greenery are interspersed with the shadow images.

The play is accompanied by haunting music with a score by Ben Kauffmann and Kyle Vetger. The trio from Manual Cinema's recent *Christmas Carol* production plays and sings the soundtrack: Lia Kohl on cello, Lucy Little on violin, and Alicia Walter on keyboards and lead vocals. *The 4th Witch* has all of the elements of a fairy tale in the style of Grimm or the darker Hans Christian Andersen stories. A young girl is orphaned, encounters danger, and emerges victorious.

Manual Cinema has made its reputation as an innovator with technology old and new. I highly recommend seeing a Manual Cinema performance. It is an experience that you won't soon forget. The founders of Manual Cinema are puppeteers and musicians. Drew Dir, Sarah Fornace, Ben Kauffman, Julia Miller, and Kyle Vetger founded the group in 2010. (Kathy D. Hey)



*Nasty, Brutish and Short*. Photo by Richard Termine.

## ***Nasty, Brutish and Short (Chicago/International)***

Philosopher Thomas Hobbes said this about the state of nature without a government: "no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, nasty, brutish, and short." This sentiment resonates in this particular political moment, and provides the title *Nasty, Brutish and Short* for this 60-minute showcase of global puppeteers, performed at Constellation.

Curated by [Rough House Puppet Arts](#), and hosted by [Noah Ginex Puppet Company's](#) cabaret host Jameson (and others like a moose and a yeti), this late-night (10:30pm) lineup is a smorgasbord of rotating different eight-minute or briefer acts, also [streamed live](#) and recorded. This puppet slam is for finished works and those in progress. In front of a packed house, Chicagoan Karen Hoyer shares a story of a ballerina, and Philly's Maisie O'Brien tells a tale using a rolling shadow box (great ASMR), a delicate backlit Balinese concoction.

Tian Gombau of Spain uses stones and finger legs on a tabletop to create a sweet seaside story, while New York's Zlata Godunova uses her voluminous, pocketed skirt to cleverly reveal the story of mischievous, murderous matriarchal monarch [Saint Olga of Kyiv](#).

Minneapolis's Oanh Vu shares a door-infused vignette, and the Rubicon Studios pair (from Chicago and Boise) "wear" near life-sized puppets in a wild, *Sweeney Todd*-type story (with a splattering of *Titus Andronicus*) about a pair of elderly tomato growers and their secret recipe. (Karin McKie)



Harlem Doll Palace. Photo by Richard Termine.

## ***The Harlem Doll Palace (New York)***

*The Harlem Doll Palace* is based on a real museum in the brownstone apartment of Lenon Holder Hoyte, aka Aunt Len. When she retired as a New York public school teacher, she opened Aunt Len's Doll and Toy Museum, featuring a collection of up to 6,000 dolls and toys. This wonderful 90-minute production was written and performed by Alva Rogers, directed by Ash Winkfield and performed at the Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts.

The puppets tell the history of the eras in which they were created. Hoyte had dolls that represented Black women in an era where they had little representation. There was Black Nurse and the Thomas Alva Edison talking doll with articulated limbs, a porcelain face, and fixed eyes. The Edison doll in this show is dressed in army attire and announces a tally of the museum population like a morning "reveille." The count goes down as the show goes on. People and vandals took advantage of Aunt Len as she grew older and less vigilant.

Rogers' performance as Aunt Len is brilliant. It's a composite apparition of the older Black women I met as a child: relatives, neighbors, and my granny's friends. Rogers' sweet singing voice echoes Sunday morning hymns, and she plays Hoyte as someone who believed she was part of her dolls' world as much as they were of hers. The production design is by Winkfield and Jessica Simon. The light blue valance over the stage creates a proscenium arch over the collection of dolls.

It felt like a step back in time, on a cellular level, recalling the tchotchke-filled homes of the elders of my youth. It was a nostalgia-inducing and bittersweet step back in time that pays tribute to women's contributions, often overlooked or forgotten. Alva Rogers has immortalized Lenan Holden-Hoyte through puppetry. (*Kathy D. Hey*)



## Review: Everything you ever needed to know about the sex lives of puppets, plus Manual Cinema's latest



"The Sex Lives of Puppets" by Blind Summit Theatre of England at the Biograph Theatre in Chicago. (Charlie Lyne)



By **CHRIS JONES** | [cjones5@chicagotribune.com](mailto:cjones5@chicagotribune.com) | Chicago Tribune

PUBLISHED: January 27, 2026 at 12:45 PM CST | UPDATED: January 27, 2026 at 2:30 PM CST

A show called **"The Sex Lives of Puppets"** is enough to attract attention, and I would have attributed the full house at the Victory Gardens Biograph Theatre on Monday to judicious marketing had I not heard reports of sold-out houses throughout the Chicago International Puppet Festival, a January festival that has quietly become one of the more [significant events](#) on this city's cultural calendar. It now draws an international collection of puppeteers and their followers during a month when Chicago needs visitors the most.

Puppet lovers are all huddled at the Allerton Hotel on the Magnificent Mile and traipsing off to watch shows all over the city, at venues from the Studebaker Theater to the Chopin to the Biograph. I was so pleased to see the underutilized Biograph packed with people again that I had to restrain myself from trying to find the switch to light up the historic marquee, absurdly left dark as frigid folks shuffled their way into this great Chicago venue, out of the cold and ready for some flashy puppet naughtiness.

Many of the festival's attractions are short runs. Take, for example, Manual Cinema's "The 4th Witch," already over and out after a sold-out run. Blair Thomas, the festival's artistic director, remarked before the show that one can watch puppets (he uses the term broadly) all over the world without ever seeing an aesthetic quite like the Manual Cinema aesthetic. He's right, of course.

Like many arts-loving Chicagoans, I'm well aware of the skills and artistry of this Chicago-based group that spends most of its time touring. But for us longtime fans, **"The 4th Witch"** (a riff on "Macbeth," not unlike how "Wicked" is a riff on "The Wizard of Oz") still represented a whole new level of accomplishment. I don't mean that necessarily in terms of emotional appeal (I prefer some of their other work in that regard), but in terms of how many hundreds of images this incredible company produces in a show, and how dramatically and gorgeously these vistas are sequenced.

Before catching this piece, I'd always thought of Manual Cinema as a group with a hand-made aesthetic, its visuals forming over time, some working better than others. "The 4th Witch" is at a whole new technical level. It doesn't feel any less organic, but the music, ideas and above all the images all come in a great rush, far more beautifully formed than I've ever felt with their prior shows. Alas, although this piece has been seen elsewhere, this festival run was the one hometown outing to date. I hereby request that this company correct that problem, and that we don't have to wait for a festival to see it again.



2 of 4

"The 4th Witch" by the Chicago-based company Manual Cinema. (Katie Doyle)



For now, witches have given way to cavorting puppets showing off their sex lives. Blind Summit is a famously witty British theater company, led for more than 25 years by artistic director Mark Down, a famed and much-loved teacher of his craft as well as a performer who becomes at one with his tools, so to speak.

Blind Summit also knows how to sell puppetry in a small-scale touring realm often dominated by comedy. In the U.K., they're often compared to the iconic 1980s TV show "Spitting Image," which mercilessly lampooned political figures by created puppet sculptures wickedly emphasizing their least-flattering features. Blind Summit's newest show put me in mind of the British TV show "Gogglebox," a fly-on-the-wall celebration of the blather of ordinary, opinionated Brits.

"The Sex Lives of Puppets" (which, by the way, features mostly puppets of a certain age, not nubile marionettes offering vicarious thrills) is a piece based on interviews, or so the company claims, with a variety of characters who are managing to press on with their sex lives, notwithstanding a variety of setbacks from age to inhibition and from bodily limitations to loneliness. (Puppets get lonely, don't ya know, and they are not all flexible like Kermit.) You watch them talk about their sex lives and, to some degree, do their things with their human helpers and, well, it's all great and even poignant fun on a cold night.

The festival's multiple venues are rocking through Sunday with several other shows. The puppets are having sex at the Biograph through Saturday.

*The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival continues through Feb. 1 at various venues; schedules and tickets at [ChicagoPuppetFest.org](http://ChicagoPuppetFest.org)*

*Update: This story has been changed to correct information about run dates for Manual Cinema.*

# THE LOYOLA PHOENIX

Friday, January 30, 2026

By [Paige Dillinger](#), [Ava Witherite](#) | January 28, 2026, 9:09 am



## Blue Skies Ahead: Comfort Food, Knit for Minnesota, Puppetry

*The weekly good news column is back for the Spring '26 semester.*

As the windy city moves on from negative single-digit weather to positive single-digit weather, the Loyola community can rest easy and warm with many indoor activities, and one outdoor — open skate at Warren Park — for the most adventurous rambblers.

Take a break from getting buried in snow and schoolwork and venture into the world of talking with your teeth closed at the annual puppet theater festival, including many free performances near the Lake Shore Campus. Keep those coats on, Ramblers, bearable cold is within reach.

### **Puppet Theater Festival: Until Feb. 1**

It's time to play the music... it's time to light the lights... at the annual puppet theater festival at various locations around the city. Select events are free for those looking to save up for fun in the sun later this year, including the Alex and Olmsted [neighborhood tour](#), which stops at the Loyola Park Fieldhouse at 4:30 p.m. Jan. 30 on 1230 W. Greenleaf Ave.



# Five Things To Do in Chicago: Jan. 30 to Feb. 1, 2026

---

January 28, 2026 Things To Do In Chicagoland

Don't let the cold hold you back — these weekend events are worth layering up for. See what's happening near you.

## **Catch the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival.**

The Chicago International Puppet Festival's neighborhood tour brings puppet performances into community spaces across the city. Featuring artists from around the world, the shows range in style and storytelling, offering a close-up look at contemporary puppetry beyond the traditional stage. Each stop is designed to be accessible, intimate, and welcoming for audiences of all ages.

**Date:** Jan. 30–Feb. 1

**Time:** Various Times

**Cost:** Various Prices

**Location:** Various Locations

**More Info:** [chicagopuppetfest.org](http://chicagopuppetfest.org)

# The New York Times

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.



By [Laura Collins-Hughes](#) Visuals by [Alexander Coggin](#)

Reporting from Chicago

Jan. 29, 2026

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 [“Gooney’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 Ploxus Polaire's critical remix of "A Doll's House," Yngvild Aspeli plays Nora Helmer even as she puppeteers the cast of realistic, life-size puppets. Alexander Coggin 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.

On a set (by François Gauthier-Lafaye) that shifts from bright domestic prettiness to shadowy lurking menace, this "A Doll's House" is a departure for Plexus Polaire, which tends to make its productions from works of literature rather than drama. The show's chief interest is the web of lies that Nora has arduously constructed and trapped herself in, but as an investigation of agency it all seems very cerebral, without emotional underpinning.

The visuals are striking, some indelible; visceral punch is missing, though, and that matters in retelling a classic, even when skewing it. That said, I wish I could stick around and see the other production that Plexus Polaire has brought to the festival, ["Trust Me for a While,"](#) a horror comedy involving a ventriloquist's dummy, running through Saturday.

I decided to bypass a couple of shows that I'd caught last year in New York — Alva Puppet Theater's ["The Harlem Doll Palace"](#) and Wakka Wakka's ["Dead as a Dodo"](#) — but was eager to revisit KT Shivak's intrepidly inventive ["Rhynoceron,"](#) which thrilled me when I saw it last spring in its premiere at [Puppetopia](#).

The show's marquee feature is its majestic puppet rhinoceros, a hulking, spectacular, even lyrical creature with soulful eyes and bristle-tipped, stand-up ears. But Shivak uses a remarkable scope of styles to tell this history-based story, about a rhinoceros that became an object of fascination in Renaissance Europe, its sad fate determined by the whims of cosseted, powerful men: a king, a pope.



Alexander Coggin for The New York Times

Performed by three puppeteers (Shivak, Chih-Jou Cheng and Jacky Kelsey) and one musician (Ben Zucker), the show is often intimate in scale, with small puppets and detailed drawings that are significantly less legible from a distance, especially when the lighting (by Daphne Agosin) is murky. “Rhynoceron” demands, really, to be seen up close; the 147-seat theater where it ran in Chicago was too large for it. Watching once from the 10th row and again from the fourth, I had night-and-day experiences.

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



Alexander Coggin for The New York Times

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.

# WBEZ91.5

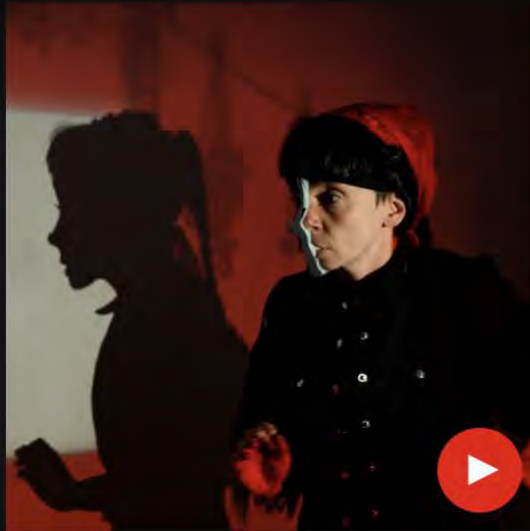
WBEZCHICAGO  MENU

 LISTEN LIVE

 DONATE



Your NPR news source



WBEZ News • 3 min 40 sec


## Chicago's Manual Cinema on why puppets are such a draw in digital age


Manual Cinema's new production "The Fourth Witch" puts a twist on Shakespeare's "Macbeth."

Courtesy of Katie Doyle

By Mike Davis

Jan 29, 2026, 9:53am CST

 SHARE

 COPY LINK

The Chicago International Puppet Theatre Festival is underway. One of the hottest tickets this year was Manual Cinema's "The Fourth Witch," a fresh take on Shakespeare's "Macbeth." WBEZ theater reporter Mike Davis takes us behind the scenes of the production.

## Your Chicago Curated Weekend: 1/29 and Beyond

JULIAN RAMIREZ / JANUARY 29, 2026 / UNCATEGORIZED

We're still in the middle of these cold winter temps with some snowfall in our future. But that doesn't mean we can't have some fun this weekend with all the amazing events going on! We're in the middle of Chicago Restaurant Week, the final weekend of International Puppet Theater Festival and Buddy Guy's annual performances, and so much more! Bundle up and remember to stay warm while you enjoy everything the city has to offer!

Let's get on with your curated weekend!



The image shows an Instagram post from the account 'chipuppetfest' in Chicago, Illinois. The post features a promotional graphic for the 'CHICAGO INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATER FESTIVAL' running from 'JAN 21 - FEB 1, 2026'. The graphic includes a green circular badge that says 'TICKETS ON SALE!' and a photograph of a puppet character with a human-like face and a furry headpiece, sitting on the floor. Below the graphic, the post has 404 likes and a caption that reads: 'The wait is over — Today is that day! Tickets for the 2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival are officially ON SALE! For two unforgettable weeks, Chicago becomes a gathering place for the largest puppetry festival in North America — full of astonishing revelations and delightful insights about ourselves and others. Now's your moment to experience amazing puppet theater from around the world — live, in person, in community. Claim your tickets today — link in bio! <a href='\"https://chicagopuppetfest.org\">https://chicagopuppetfest.org</a>'. The caption also includes photo credits and a list of social media handles for various puppetry-related organizations and artists.

### **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival @ Various Locations, Various Times**

**WHAT:** Discover the world of puppetry!

**SO WHAT:** Add a little something different to your weekend plans as the **Chicago International Puppet Theater festival** spends the last half of January in town. Check out a variety of shows, experiences, and **workshops** throughout town and home letting audiences immerse themselves in a world of puppets. Special events like **neighborhood tours** will be great multi-day highlights! **Check out this weekend's schedule at their website!**

**NOW WHAT:** You can find full ticket info in the links above or on the festival's website!

## Today In Culture, Friday, January 30, 2026: Chicago Art World Protests ICE | James Rondeau Draws Plans | Avondale's Belmont Tavern Reopens

BY RAY PRIDE | JANUARY 30, 2026

### STAGE

#### Puppets, People And The City Of Chicago

“Crowds are flocking to the annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival for performances of ‘A Doll’s House,’ a ‘Macbeth’-inspired witch tale and more featuring puppets big and small,” animates the New York Times ([gift link](#)). “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.)”

# Chicago Tribune

## Chicago Theater Loop

Monday, February 2, 2026

Good afternoon. **Chicago Theatre Week** begins Friday.

Just one more week to see the national tour of "**Stereophonic**," which I consider a masterpiece, although not all my readers agree. I can't imagine this show being done quite like this again; the direction here is truly superlative.

Other new reviews either published now or coming soon are "Così fan tutte" at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, "**The Sex Lives of Puppets**" at the Biograph Theatre, "The Enormous Crocodile" at the Studebaker, "**Mary Jane**" at Northlight Theatre and "Little Shop of Horrors" at the Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. This was a busy week for me.

Now to the news: About Face Theatre has announced it will stage "Modern Gentleman" by Preston Max Allen. Opening March 18 at Raven Theatre, the show will be directed by Landree Fleming. Lookingglass Theatre ensemble member David Schwimmer is working hard around town to market the comeback of the long-lived Chicago theater company. Tickets are on sale for the next show at the Water Tower Water Works, Matthew C. Yee's "White Rooster," coming in March.

Season of Concern says it raised a record \$140,000 in its holiday collections for Chicago's artistic folks in need. News of two former Chicago theater types: Eric Schroeder has been appointed general manager of New York's Public Theater. Joanie Schultz, currently associate artistic director of the Cincinnati Playhouse, is the 2026 winner of the Zelda Fichandler Award from the Stage Directors and Choreographers Foundation. "This award affirms decades of deepening roots and focusing on the work rather than chasing visibility," Schultz said.

The dinner circus show **Teatro ZinZanni** closed down operations in Chicago on Sunday. This is not the first time the show has closed, frankly, so we'll have to see what happens next. But this leaves a fabulous downtown performance space in the Cambria Hotel presumably up for grabs. January is the cruelest month for live entertainment in this city.

Magician (and a favorite of mine) Lucy Darling returns to her old **Chicago Magic Lounge** tonight for a show. Lili-Anne Brown has a gig at New York City Center's Encores! series of concert-style musicals; she'll stage Michael John LaChiusa's "The Wild Party" in March. Katie Spelman will be the choreographer; I just caught her work in "Wonder" at the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The new season at the **Paramount Theatre** in Aurora is certainly a step back in scale from previous years, with the holiday show being a bespoke version of "A Christmas Carol" written and directed by staffer Trent Stork. The 2026-27 season opens with next summer's first Chicago-area production of "Mean Girls," directed by Devon Hayakawa. In 2027, the theater, which has lost much of its City of Aurora funding after a change in administrations, will stage "Sunday in the Park With George" (also directed by Stork) and end with a new 1980s-vibe take (!) on "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat," directed by Matthew Silar.

Up next, though, is the rising director Jessica Fisch's new production of "Dear Evan Hansen," which should be both affordable and easily accessible for that show's many teen fans in the city's western suburbs. No shows are being directed in the news season by the artistic director par excellence, Jim Corti, alas. And no more Bold Series, alas.

But lots of bold shows elsewhere, and I will see you at the theater.

— *Chris Jones, chief theater critic*

## Witches, Shadows, Sight and Sound: The puppeteers of Manual Cinema

The story of the puppeteers behind Emmy-winning documentary “The Forger,” the credits and flashbacks of “Candyman” (2021) and their own catalogue of original live puppet shows.

Finn Morse, Theater Beat Writer / February 2, 2026



Provided by Manual Cinema

Actors perform during a dress rehearsal for “The 4th Witch” at the Spoleto Festival USA in Charleston, South Carolina, in June 2025. The show is loosely inspired by Macbeth.

They started as a group of five friends tampering with an overhead projector. Now, they’re the face of shadow puppeteering in Chicago.

Manual Cinema is a Chicago-based puppet troupe, widely known for their shadow puppets and horror-inspired original plays. Founded in 2013, the freshly graduated group of creatives made their start from humble beginnings before their ideas took them around the world.

“We very much focused on creating the art, and not creating a company,” said Julia Miller, a co-artistic director at Manual Cinema. “When we did have a really strong foundation of the visual style and aesthetics and techniques, over three or four years, then we figured we could segway this to making money off our work.”

Manual Cinema’s story started with a love for puppetcraft before making profits. The group of friends put on smaller productions in Chicago’s bars, community spaces, and even in a living room window on Halloween night for passersby.

Last weekend, their production “The 4th Witch” was showcased at the 2026 Chicago International Puppet Festival held at Victory Gardens Theater, just a short walk away from DePaul’s Lincoln Park Campus. They had planned six — eventually seven — show performances for the weekend.

“I designed (the puppets) and they’re all handmade, animated by the puppeteers,” said Drew Dir, the show’s writer and director. “Each puppet is only used for a couple seconds for the show, but put together with hundreds and hundreds of them ... it tells a story, it puts together a cinematic sequence.”

“The 4th Witch” loosely adheres to the story of Macbeth, reimagined during a gothic World War I backdrop. While hiding from trench combat, a young orphaned girl is rescued by a mysterious old woman, who turns out to be one of the three fateful witches who tell Macbeth his fate. With no other place to go, the girl joins the coven, becoming the fourth witch.

As Manual Cinema has grown, so has its ambition. Original shows like “Ada/Ava” and “Mementos Mori” moved the group to innovate, adding sound design and live musical performances to accompany the animated visuals which were composed and designed by Ben Kauffman and Kyle Vegter.

“We are, at our heart, a collaboration between visual artists and music artists,” said Sarah Fornace, longtime puppeteer and narrative designer. “The music is on equal footing with the visuals and telling the story. Music is the omniscient narrator who can go in and out of characters’ heads, set the scene, the mood.”

One of Manual Cinema’s central missions is capturing the deliberations of live performances. In an age of artificial content being the most widespread visual art form, the importance of puppets and live theater does not go unappreciated in the public eye. Manual Cinema’s puppet performances sell out on the regular.

“I think puppets are really having a moment right now,” Dir said. “I think it’s because we’re so inundated with computer-generated special effects that I think there’s something about the puppet on stage or screen. It’s imbued with human life and emotion that really appeals to people.”

These shadow puppet stories often intertwine gothic horror with familiar tales. The shadow puppets are used as vessels to tell often vulnerable stories in an accessible way. “The 4th Witch” is no different.

“Because of shadow puppetry, there’s a natural affinity to the gothic,” Dir said. “I love using the genre of horror to investigate a psychological question, a social question. I like using horror as a frame.”

Live productions like “The Magic City,” “Hänsel und Gretel” and the now-touring “Frankenstein” implement and reimagine fantastical gothic stories into this accessible and digestible format.

After gaining attention from The New York Times during a festival performance in Edinburgh, Scotland, Manual Cinema collaborated with the paper on “The Forger,” a 2016 documentary short film about World War II child rescuer Adolfo Kaminsky. Manual Cinema’s work on “The Forger” helped it win a News and Documentary Emmy award, the tenth Emmy won by NYT.

With widespread acclaim and love for their art, Manual Cinema was spotlighted again in their collaboration with Universal Studios and MGM on “Candyman,” a 2021 sequel to the original 1992 gothic horror movie of the same name. Chicago-based painters like Cameron Spratley and Sherwin Ovid were asked by name to work on the film, which made Chicago-based Manual Cinema a choice pick for the movie’s requested shadow puppet inclusions.

The group crafted scenes tying to the original “Candyman,” an accessible way for audiences to experience that movie’s emotions anew. Writers and producers including Jordan Peele were so impressed with the scenes, that they added more.

“Flashbacks were written into the script,” Miller said. “Creatively, they were interested in capturing them in a more artistic frame, not just cutting to live action. I was surprised about the amount of creative control we had.”

The magic of puppeteering is one of Chicago’s unsung staples, stretching back to some of the country’s first radio broadcasts, and the list of titles only growing. “Kukla, Fran, and Ollie,” “Child’s Play,” and now, Manual Cinema. A new entry into the Puppet Hall of Fame, sure to enchant for years to come.

## Review: There's quite a monster at the center of 'Little Shop of Horrors' at Marriott Theatre



Jordan Anthony Arredondo, Garrett Lutz, Maya Rowe and Ed Kross in "Little Shop Of Horrors" at Marriott Theatre in Lincolnshire. (Justin Barbin)



By **CHRIS JONES** | [cjones5@chicagotribune.com](mailto:cjones5@chicagotribune.com) | Chicago Tribune

PUBLISHED: February 3, 2026 at 10:37 AM CST | UPDATED: February 3, 2026 at 7:50 PM CST

→ The Chicago International Puppet Festival is some 30 miles to the south, but the Audrey II that shows up in director Tommy Rapley's staging of "Little Shop of Horrors" would certainly have merited a spot.

The nasty plant, the savior of Mushnik's florist store, but with an unhealthy hunger for the struggling employees therein, is quite the beast of foliage. Instead of the traditional vertical



The cast of *The Enormous Crocodile*. Photo by Danny Kaan.

## Dispatch: Puppet Theater Festival Ends With Shows Featuring Sexy Puppets, a Hungry Crocodile, a Cat and Two Dogs

THIRD COAST REVIEW STAFF / FEBRUARY 3, 2026 / CHILDREN'S THEATER, PUPPET THEATER, REVIEW, STAGES

The 8th Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival concluded Sunday, after 12 days of puppet theater productions at dozens of venues around the city. Our Third Coast writers are puppetry fans and they've written mini-reviews of the shows they saw this week. For more of our puppet theater reviews, see last week's [dispatch](#).

The puppets have departed but they'll be back for the 9th festival January 20-31, 2027.



From *Sex Lives of Puppets*, Helen and Katie. Photo by Charlie Lyne.

Blind Summit's *The Sex Lives of Puppets* attracts an audience with its bawdy title, and, oh boy, does it deliver. The 100-minute production—there's an intermission—is a vignette show. In each segment one or two puppets answer a sexually probing question asked by an invisible, unidentified interviewer.

As with any vignette show, one invariably compares the pieces. In the battle of averages, Blind Summit comes out hot, with many more hits than misses. The lovable puppets, Bunraku-style but without moving legs, are operated tabletop by two talented puppeteers, one controlling the head and silly voice, and the other on arm duty.

The interviews start with shock. A bumbling financier, after a lot of bashfulness, admits, "She likes to jerk me off." An old Scottish granny asks, "Does he think I like it, him pounding away? Pounding away?" As their monologues continue, almost without fail, a bit of vulnerability shines. Loneliness is a popular topic, and the goofy discussions have a satisfying depth.

The puppeteers strive for believability in their vocal patterns, and in that area, unfortunately, they make the worst mistakes. Some of the dialogue sounds improvised and echoes the worst patterns of regular speech: repetitions, ums, etc. The puppeteers could benefit from cutting those bad habits.

One of the show's best moments was a surprising break from the Bunraku-style. In the segment "Puppet Porn," with steamy music in the background, we're treated to all manner of sexually explicit shadow puppets. It was hilarious, perfect, though a bit much for some theatergoers. "Puppetry Porn" was the last segment before intermission. The family next to me left and never returned for the second act.

The performers could cut the mumbling, but for the most part, Blind Summit's show is a fun, dirty good time. *The Sex Lives of Puppets* was performed on the Biograph Theater's mainstage. See the trailer for this show at the end of our article. (Adam Kaz)



*Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?* Image courtesy Blair Thomas.

## ***Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature? (Chicago)***

The desire to rise above our mortal coil has informed art, religion and philosophy as long as humans have walked upright. Blair Thomas, artistic director and founder of the Chicago Puppet Fest, offers a Buddhist response to that preoccupation in two very different pieces, staged on the Chopin Theatre mainstage. His curtain raiser *Passing Through the Bardo*, set to Brian Dewan's ballad *Cowboy Outlaw*, concerns a corpse that became a carnival attraction. His main work, *Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?* takes the quotidian world of a dog and his owner to poetic heights.

The "bardo," for those (like me) not well versed in Tibetan Buddhism, refers to the gap between death and rebirth. Accompanied by Dewan's song and draped in a death cloak, Thomas enters as real-life outlaw Elmer McCurdy; extracts a crossbar to become his own puppeteer; and plays McCurdy's freak mummified body that captivated the public for decades. Thomas uses this most American story to consider the Buddhist version of limbo.

*Does a Dog Have Buddha Nature?* also brings Eastern spirituality into a standard American setting. Using cutout images on a translucent background, Thomas literally unrolls the narrative on four separate but visually connected panels. Seated in front of the panels is the Nois Quartet, featuring four saxophonists —soprano (Julian Velasco), alto (Natalia Warthen), tenor (Jordan Lulloff) and baritone (Janos Csontos) —playing music by Travis LaPlante.

Thomas takes a dog through aggression, shame, affection, rest, joy and all else in a wondrous glide as he explores whether this domesticated creature can reach an enlightened "Buddha nature." (Susan Lieberman)



Chelsea Da Silva as the Crocodile. Photo by Danny Kaan.

### ***The Enormous Crocodile: The Musical (England)***

*The Enormous Crocodile* by the Roald Dahl Story Company is adapted from Dahl's 1978 book about a greedy crocodile that wants to eat children. This gigantic creature is rumbling through the jungle, looking for its prey. But it really doesn't seem like an evil monster as it's played with whimsy by Chelsea Da Silva, so no fears about kids in the audience being terrified. (The play continues after the festival ends so you have three more weeks to see this delightful show.)

The other animals in the jungle keep the Croc from gobbling its dinner and they sing and dance their way through 18 songs in this 60-minute show. The other featured puppets are Precious Abimbola as Trunky the Elephant, Jordan Eskeisa as Humpy Rumpy the Hippopotamus, Marienella Phillips as Muggle Wump the Monkey, Ciara Hudson as Roly Poly Bird, and René Francalanza as Swing. Three more puppeteers play the children, wearing their kid costumes like bibs and kneeling to mimic kiddie height.

The puppetry style is a cross between regular performance and puppetry. The puppeteers are also singers and dancers; their costumes are partly animal and partly clothing that blends in to the animal's look. (Puppeteers who manipulate large puppets are typically dressed in black and blend into the background.)

*The Enormous Crocodile* musical was developed by Roald Dahl Story Company, Emily Lim (director), Ahmed Abdullahi Gallab (composer), Suhayla El-Bushra (book and lyrics), and Tom Brady (additional music and lyrics and music supervisor). Toby Olié is co-director and puppetry designer with Daisy Beattie as puppetry co-designer. Fly Davis is set and costume designer. Vicki Igboke-Ozoagu is choreographer.

This all-ages production is making its US premiere as part of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival and continues through February 21 at the Studebaker Theatre in the Fine Arts Building, 410 S. Michigan Ave. Tickets for *The Enormous Crocodile* for February 2-21 and more information [available here](#). (Nancy S Bishop)



*The House*. Image courtesy Sofie Krog Theatre.

## ***The House (Denmark)***

The Sofie Krog Theatre from Denmark brings a unique Nordic vibe. Sofie Krog and David Faraco are the creators, puppeteers, and producers of *The House*. Something is always brewing beneath the surface in the Nordic tales I have read. *The House* recalls Hans Christian Andersen stories for me. There are flights of fancy, but also gore and a different relationship with death.

Something is not quite right at the Warehouse Family Funeral Home. Flora, the housekeeper, is pulling gold teeth out of the corpse's mouth. She has a treasure chest full of ghoulish goods. Henry, Flora's husband, is forced into service as an axe-wielding accomplice to change the will of the funeral home owner, Mrs. Esperanza. The Lawyer makes two visits for these adjustments to Mrs. Esperanza's will, as she lays dying upstairs in a curtained bedchamber.

Enter two bumbling goons, Tony and Bruno, there to snag the stash of gold teeth and whatever else they can find. The intuitive Dog gets the biggest laughs (except when Bruno moons the audience).

The puppets are highly stylized and remind me of the great John Kricfalusi's *Ren and Stimpy*. They transcend the cartoon aspect through the dark realism of the subject matter. The action is farcical, and the pacing is brilliant. When Dog does a double-take or breaks the fourth wall, it is as if it is human. The house was packed at Steppenwolf's Merle Reskin Space, and *The House*, a 55-minute performance, was mayhem at its best. (*Kathy D. Hey*)



*About Ram*. Image courtesy Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust.

## ***About Ram (India)***

Traveling from New Dehli, Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust brings *About Ram*. This hour-long wordless production, sustained throughout in mystical energy courtesy of hypnotic music, tells the story of Prince Ram from the Bhavbhuti Ramayana. Using Bunraku-style puppets, shadow puppets, masks, and projected animations, we watch Prince Ram search and fight for his abducted beloved Sita. People who know the story will experience the show as a gorgeous reminder of its main points; everyone else, however, who isn't familiar with the Bhaybhuti Ramayana, will be totally baffled.

*About Ram* relies on four puppeteers but three pull the most weight operating a Bunraku Ram. He's about waist-high and begins onstage sleeping, his breath, I think purposefully, the first movement animated by the puppeteers. Then he wakes, he runs, he swims, he encounters a female puppet. All believably and thrillingly performed by the puppeteers who, though onstage, melt behind Prince Ram.

*About Ram* is a series of wonderful sequences and tableaux. Ram makes a pile of sand, and later the sand functions as a trail upon which he runs and walks. When Ram battles Ravan, a ten-headed demon king, one of the puppeteers becomes Ram and showcases some impressive swordsmanship.

All of this is beautiful and commendable, but how these images relate to one another, or how one scene travels to the next, is not readily apparent. Sometimes the puppets contributed to the confusion. When portraying Ravan, for instance, the puppeteers use both masks and a shadow puppet. But the mask and puppet, meant to portray the same character, were too dissimilar, so one could be forgiven for losing the thread.

Unless you know the story, the best way to enjoy the show is to abandon any hope of following the plot. Just enjoy the wonderful production. There's plenty to admire. *About Ram* was performed at the Dance Center of Columbia College. (*Adam Kaz*)



*Trust Me for a While*. Photo by Vincent Arbelet.

### ***Trust Me for a While* (France)**

Plexus Polaire is the story of a ventriloquist, a mannequin, and trust. Plexus Polaire is from France, where puppetry more often makes political statements and makes a buffoon of anyone. Pedro Hermelin Vélez is the befuddled ventriloquist who speaks for Teddy, a bright-eyed puppet with red hair and a cravat. *Trust Me for a While* was presented at the Reva and David Logan Center.

A mischievous cat peeks out while the audience is being seated and then becomes a part of the story, but not in the way I expected. The same thoughts merge between puppeteer and Teddy, with a strange turn of events that gave me goosebumps, but made me laugh too. As an American, I grew up with a different sensibility about what a puppet does and a clear idea of good versus bad. It would be bad form to laugh at a violent stabbing except when the victim is a mouthy puppet. Or is it the ventriloquist?

*Trust Me for a While*, a 45-minute performance, is brilliantly staged, with a set that distracts and fascinates the viewer. Something about the blend of colors and the bright gold valance pulled me into the scenery. This is puppetry at its most skilled. The story can be perceived as a political or moral tale, depending on the viewer. Yngvild Aspeli directed, with Melody Shanye Mahe and Laëtitia Labre handling the puppets offstage. There is beauty in the simplicity and the macabre. The audience was transfixed by the scary and the comic. (Kathy D. Hey)

Enjoy the trailer for *The Sex Lives of Puppets*.



*Support arts and culture journalism today.* Our work can't happen without your support. Contribute today and ensure we can continue to share the latest reviews, essays, and previews of the most anticipated arts and culture events across the city.



## Chicago Stage and Screen

Artists writing about theater, film and online artistic expression.



Angela Allyn · 2 days ago · 5 min read



# 8th Annual Puppetfest Warms the City



In the depth of winter all over Chicago, the Puppets are here!!! In these days when getting artists from other nations to our shores is a herculean and thankless task, the folks at the Chicago International Puppet Theatre Festival lived up to their names, despite life threatening storms and wind chills and the possibility that an artist would be turned away at the airport. CIPTF brought the most moving and beautiful art to us from the south side to the north side. A pro tip: *buy tickets when they go on sale at the end of 2026*— many of the shows sold out long before opening night, and while the website has this cool function where you can find tickets, you might miss something truly amazing if you don't shop early. Also some shows were able to add additional viewings, or you could standby and get in, but don't get shut out of one of the best parts of winter in Chi Town.

This year's fest was a reassertion of humanity and of hope and kindness in the darkest times. Strange to think about objects brought to life bringing us our humanity on stage, kind of the direct opposite of AI faking humanity, but these exquisitely crafted bits of fiber and wood and clay made over hours by dedicated human hands often in community became a kind of sacramental ritual that we as a bundled up audience could partake of.

I wanted to pretend this year that I was traveling to Chicago just for this as I have done for the Berlinale film fest and Canada's Stratford Festival. My life bulloxed it up a bit but for about 8 of the 12 days of the festival I could immerse myself in whatever was offered and I even got to spend time in the Puppet Hub, a gathering spot, exhibition and coffee house on the 4th floor of the Fine Arts Building where the Puppet fest admin offices are located.

---



I began with Plexis Polaire's [A Doll House](#) which adapted the Ibsen classic of a woman trapped in domesticity creating an unsettling Jungian nightmare. The ever enlarging spider stalking Nora, the wife who strains at her marriage constraints, is iconic and joins Shelob and Aragog as an epic arachnid. The fest highlighted artists and companies from Norway, even as Chicago became an arctic village while they were in town. The life sized puppets became eerie mirrors of humans, so close and not yet real, so surreal. Plexus Polaire brought 3 works to the fest and all of them had some form of development at the Company Residencies at Nordland Visual Theatre on the Lofoten Islands which is located in a small fishing village north of the Arctic Circle. Perhaps these puppets are more used to the cold than we are!

The London based company Blind Summit returned to Chicago with the naughty and bawdy and hysterically funny and quite sweet [Sex Lives of Puppets](#) conceived by Mark Down who also directed along with Ben Keton and was one of the puppeteers. A collaboration between Blind Summit and the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles it was an honest look at real people where puppets showcase the joys and silliness and sadness and connection- it was diverse and honest and moving. Blind Summit often features puppets that portray older people and topics that are not common: they like to say that they seek to subvert people's expectations of puppetry, but my experience has been that this is a group of artists that digs deep to tell moving stories with puppets that become friends.

In a very European film fest way Laura Heit's art film shorts in a movie theatre I did not know existed at the Chicago institution Tje Music Box. This velvet curtained viewing room is like watching a film inside my childhood music box, which is totally appropriate for this artist who also brought her Matchbox tiny puppet shows to the fest and had some exquisite objects and hand drawn animations at the Puppet Hub. Many of her films were less than a minute but the entire reel was compelling and demonstrated Heit's enormous range. Every year the fest features some type of filmic puppetry and Heit is a master at visual tales.

I managed to squeeze in two local masterpieces because of added shows and seats: Manual Cinema's latest work [The 4th Witch](#) about a girl who survives the French occupation and has chilling mirrors of our time, and Festival founder and director Blair Thomas's dharma talk as puppet show, a two parter that began with [Passing Through The Bardo](#) and concluded with [Does a Dog have a Buddha Nature](#) (pick up your souvenir good dog bad dog mugs in the gift shop) I found both shows profoundly meaningful and they left me changed.



Next up in my immersive puppet week with Untitled Theatre Company #61 and Yara Arts Groups monumental and yet tiny [The Left Hand of Darkness](#), a powerful adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's landmark 1969 feminist sci fi novel. Tom Lee is the co director of the Festival and the adjacent Chicago Puppet Studio so this artistry is very much home grown. The show took place in the jewel box Wirtz Center in Northwestern's Abbot Hall so it was intimate while being planetary. If you did not read the book and you really should, its about Genly, an emissary to an alien world traveling alone in the universe in an effort to include them in an intergalactic culture. The planet, named Winter for obvious reasons, is populated by ambisexual characters, and challenges concepts of gender and communication. It's a stunningly contemporary and relevant work and the cast led by Miguel Long as the Emissary and Winter Jones as Estraven, a Winter noble combine humans and puppets in a magical way. Michael Zerang's original score is a must hear. I finished up first with a Roald Dahl romp with The Enormous Crocodile: review here <https://www.chicagostageandscreen.com/post/dahl-s-crocodile-a-symbol-of-our-times>



Then as my finale, I headed over to the Dance Center of Columbia College where the Katkatha Puppet Arts Trust presented a short version of the story of the Ramayana in the form of *About Ram*. These artists from New Delhi brought us in to Prince Ram's war with the demon king Ravana after he abducts his wife Sita and aligns with the monkey general Hanuman. In one short hour we experience this classic myth and end with Ram's return to rule. The show uses projections and an enormous traditional leather shadow puppet Ravana. It was a warm ending to a truly spectacular festival for me, and while I don't ever love the onset of winter, the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival gives us something to anxiously await in the dark days of January each year. Get more info and archived rundowns of this and previous festivals here:

<https://chicagopuppetfest.org/>

Be sure to sign up for the mailing list so you can be ready for the next Fest!

## К 8-му пришествию кукол: о кукольном арсенале

Михаил Гуревич    Культура



*Общий заголовок ставлю по заведенному порядку, чтобы не сбиться, напоминая о нумерации-хронологии этого замечательного, как ни крути и ни привыкай, события в нашей театральной, если не шире, культурной жизни, в возрождение-развитие которого из ранних инкарнаций трудно было поверить и трудно же было предсказать такой разгон и – тьфу-тьфу – постоянство: международного фестиваля театра кукол (напомню еще, повторяя как мантру: в широком-свободном его понимании и вариациях).*

*(translating to English...)*

And so again, as usual, in the Epiphany frosts of 2026, again and no less alarming, as it turns out, we warm up and, perhaps, escape for a while, in theater halls and/or in fantasy worlds.

One such—speaking briefly for now about several performances performed and seen during the first few days of the festival—was awaiting me at the opening, a work by the Norwegian-New York collective Wakka Wakka: "Dead as a Dodo." In the spacious stage box of the glorious old Studebaker Hall (also a traditional opening venue, and not only), holography and other lighting technology—immaterial, as is now customary, scenography—paints and constructs, almost with flashes of the aurora borealis, cave-like spaces. Which is appropriate, for this is the afterlife, in all its glory, not particularly gloomy, though in its own way even cozy, as the characters—naturally, skeletons—settle in. Their two main characters: a boy and a bird—could have been called that, following the example. All sorts of things happen: battles for the bones—the main treasure of these places—with the powers that be, its king-princess, and their cronies; and escapes, and passages through other circles of their own underworld, upwards and upwards... to a new life, oddly enough, or to complete dissolution along the way. Beyond this plot—not exactly childish, but rather somewhat naively straightforward—there are also meanings and the effect of the form-technique itself. As is well known, this performance takes place in a black room (as

expected: the puppeteers are immersed in a black background, the skeletal puppets live and play in the light of dagger-like side spotlights), complicated and filled with other effects, even to the point of fluorescence, it seems. But here's a paradox, and one rich in metaphorical implications: according to the plot twist, our poor boy is supposed to die a second time, completely—his bones thinning and disappearing piece by piece... so how could this be represented in a visual, spectacular performance? Perhaps as a stippled glow, another luminescent effect. His bird friend, on the other hand, will gradually materialize, literally from feathers to his entire fleshy being, in the happy ending. These and other, even more traditional, sparkles of puppetry and playfulness, plus a somewhat bizarre, not surprisingly otherworldly, humor and occasional theatrical bravado—all do the trick and convey the warmth of joyful surprise.

---



A different excursion into the history of the animal world—or rather, into the history of natural science or the appropriation of ideas and artifacts in cultural eras—is presented in the performance "Rhinoceron" (yes, Rhinoceros, in such historically motivated spelling), thanks to the efforts of a certain young Chicago team, whose participants, as far as one can judge, are often, if not always, actors and puppeteers, and masters of puppets and everything else, who sculpted the concept, the equipment, and themselves in workshops and laboratories. And they've come up with a whole host of things, functional and expressive: from cabinet-like screens and display cases with texts or pictures in various styles and stylizations, and masks of all kinds and applications, to, finally, the almost gigantic figure of the main character—guided from within, practically by one person (in itself, technically astonishing), unless a rhinoceros' gallop is animated by a crowd. And in the other characters, flitting about in various guises—who isn't there, from Pliny the Elder, it seems, to the Pope, the Medici, and Dürer, for example—we see through them the history of the discovery and perception of an exotic monster, but in reality, more of a natural philosophy, in concepts and prejudices, in socio-cultural existence. Such is the narrative, played with joyful passion and even daring, accompanied by a live one-man band, complete with xylophone, harmonica, and all the rest. And the ingenuity itself is admirable, even if it seems a bit excessive; but then, honest generosity is a rare commodity.

There were also forays into the dichotomy of dolls and puppets, for example, in the biography of an African-American collector of a museum collection in the play "The Harlem Doll Palace" (Alva Puppet Theater), a docudrama of sorts, but not without its curious paradoxes—the transitions of one "doll" into another. Or, on a different level, and more through the collisions of the actor-mannequin, in Ibsen's "Doll's House." And more, and more. I hope to return to this and other upcoming performances in more detail next time.

ARTS + CULTURE

# 'The 4th Witch' brings immersive theatre to SUNY Oswego on Feb. 18

February 6, 2026



Previous performance of "The 4th Witch," courtesy of the Manual Cinema website.

Inspired by William Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and featuring immersive theatre elements, Manual Cinema's "The 4th Witch" will fill SUNY Oswego's Waterman Theatre at 7 p.m. on Wednesday, Feb. 18.

Part of the ARTSwego Performing Arts Series, "The 4th Witch" depicts the story of a young girl, orphaned from war, who becomes apprenticed to the three witches seen in "Macbeth." Told through shadow puppetry, actors in silhouette and live music (without dialogue or narration), "The 4th Witch" begins on the eve of an invasion of a small town by the local warlord Macbeth.

The girl flees the invading army and escapes into the nearby forest. There, she is rescued by the witches. They agree to take the girl on as an apprentice, on the condition that she must never use her powers for revenge. Consumed by grief and rage, the girl comes to realize that it was Macbeth who killed her father -- and that she must choose between reconciliation or vengeance.

"The 4th Witch" is an inversion of Shakespeare's play, exploring themes of grief, war, generational conflict and cycles of violence through the collateral damage left behind on the battleground. Manual Cinema will host two workshops as well as the evening performance.

Manual Cinema is an Emmy Award-winning performance collective, design studio and film/video production company founded in 2010 by Drew Dir, Sarah Fornace, Ben Kauffman, Julia Miller and Kyle Vegter. Manual Cinema combines handmade shadow puppetry, cinematic techniques and innovative sound and music to create immersive stories for stage and screen. Their Emmy came for their documentary short "The Forger" last year.

When the group performed the show at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in January, The New York Times described "The 4th Witch" as a "movie-like story on a suspended screen." The piece also described Manual Cinema as the "pride of the Chicago puppetry scene, beloved for both its art and its prominence."

Despite the subject matter of the production, The New York Times also described it as "charming, funny, life-affirming ..."

Using vintage overhead projectors, multiple screens, puppets, actors, live feed cameras, multi-channel sound design and live music, Manual Cinema transforms the experience of attending the cinema and imbues it with liveness, ingenuity and theatricality.

This engagement of Manual Cinema is made possible in part through the ArtsCONNECT program of Mid Atlantic Arts with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Audiences should know that the production includes loud sounds and flashing lights.

Available via [tickets.oswego.edu](https://tickets.oswego.edu), tickets for the show are free for SUNY Oswego students, and \$20 for the general public, \$15 for faculty/staff/alumni and \$5 non-SUNY Oswego students.

-- *Written by Nina Ottesen of the Class of 2026*

# Sex, sci-fi, Ibsen, and more

*Puppets revealed human truths at the eighth Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival.*

by Rob Silverman Ascher and Kimzyn Campbell

February 9, 2026



*A Doll's House* from Plexus Polaire at the 2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

Credit: Tomas Lauvland Pettersen

Sometimes the best way to tell stories about humanity is through inanimate objects. This year, the eighth [Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival](#) looked backward to classics (Plexus Polaire's version of Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*), into the future (Untitled Theatre Company No. 61 and Yara Arts Group's adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness*), and into the bedroom (Blind Summit Theatre's *The Sex Lives of Puppets*) to capture what it means to be human at this fraught time. Using all manner of media and genres, this year's festival proved that Chicago is second to none when it comes to puppet arts. In just 11 years, founder and artistic director [Blair Thomas](#) and his team have made our city a destination for puppet lovers from around the nation and the globe, and given Chicagoans a reason to step outdoors in the coldest part of January.

*Reader* contributors Kimzyn Campbell and Rob Silverman Ascher captured nine of the shows in this year's festival; as a bonus, Campbell also caught a show in the Counter-Fest—an event put together to provide more local artists a chance to show off their chops, and to provide audiences who couldn't get tickets to the main festival (which sells out quickly) the chance to take in some new work in intimate settings. It's always worth remembering that [great puppet and object-theater work is happening around town](#) outside of the festival, too. (Kerry Reid)

### ***A Doll's House***

When Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* first landed on stage in 1879, I doubt anyone dreamed it would be one of the world's most frequently produced plays someday. Back then, it caused near riots in its depiction of a woman bucking patriarchy. By today's standards, Ibsen's play would seem quite tame, but France's [Plexus Polaire](#) is not tame, and their take on Ibsen's classic added symbolic layers of meaning through large-scale puppetry that includes life-size puppet characters, giant spiders and birds, and effects through optical illusions created by switching up the parts played by people and puppets frequently. You might recognize this as classic Plexus Polaire if you saw their previous offerings in the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival: *Moby Dick* in 2023 and *Dracula: Lucy's Dream* in 2025. Their reputation for elaborate and impeccable puppetry, creepy pacing, and exquisite lighting is well earned.

The imagery of a bird knocked senseless by the unseen window takes on an ominous meaning when Nora, Torvald's "little bird" of a wife, suddenly has the giant feathered head of a sparrow. Or when spiders slowly encroach on her desperate cross-stitching attempts to avoid the unravelling of her life. Nora is a woman trying to find herself at a time when women had so little agency. Yngvild Aspeli, actor-puppeteer-codirector (with Paola Rizza), really captures the spirit of this timeless conflict as she replicates the burdens of womanhood: running a house, raising children, working in and out of the home, and fixing financial issues behind the scenes.

Her activity level alone exemplifies this most of the play—she is the sole puppeteer, running from one life-sized puppet to another. But eventually, the world around her becomes more alive as she herself begins to recede, and Torvald springs forth as a fully formed man—just as it's too late for her to care anymore. A heartrending tragedy with moments of comedy and, as always with Plexus Polaire, just the right tinge of horror. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***The 4th Witch***

What fuels war? How are we all complicit in ongoing human rights violations? What kind of protection do we owe each other, and especially the young among us? These are some issues most of us grapple with lately, and [Manual Cinema](#) is ready to take us with them as they explore the same themes in *The 4th Witch*, directed by Drew Dir. Their Chicago premiere tackles such questions head-on, but in [Manual Cinema style](#), which means the show is led by live music, full of powerful symbolism and packed with stunning visuals to get your heart pounding.



Manual Cinema's *The 4th Witch*  
Credit: Katie Doyle

Set in wartime, the story follows a young girl who is orphaned in an air strike and adopted by three witches. She becomes the fourth, living her days in the woods with them and learning of their mysterious ways, as they make a living collecting and distilling the magic of mushrooms. Manual Cinema combines their shadow puppetry designs, live-action shots, and music (score and sound design by Kyle Vegter and Ben Kauffman) to create a seamless and well-choreographed melange that is endlessly captivating. Wherever your eyes look, there is an actor/puppeteer donning a cape or flipping through shadow images. Each performer switches between roles and pops up—sometimes only for a moment—to create an effect or to offer a hand. While your brain is busy keeping up with the dizzying array of imagery, a story emerges, implying that perhaps the witches are more complicit than they seem, and less idyllic.

Girl, played fiercely by Sarah Fornace, is seemingly the most powerful as the fourth witch. But as she learns more about anger and her own formidable power, she takes on a Lady Macbeth “out damn spot” stance, becoming increasingly horrified. Fornace’s longtime collaborator, Julia Miller, plays the lead witch with the aplomb of an actual crone. Jeffrey Paschal is a menacing Macbeth and soldier. Leah Casey and Lizi Breit flit between their multiple roles and costumes as gracefully as a ballet, which is augmented by the live music, performed by Lucy Little (vocals and violin), Lia Kohl (vocals and cello), and Alicia Walter (lead vocals and keyboard). It’s an altogether gorgeous piece that ends with a mystical, symbolic trinity of the witches being usurped and replaced by a younger trinity.

The whole original directorial team collaborated on the concept to create this triumph with a signature Manual Cinema vibe. Running it in their hometown at the festival during a time of political upheaval and giving us all space to contemplate our own reckonings with evil was just the icing on the cake. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***The Harlem Doll Palace***

Lenon Hoyte, [better known as “Aunt Len,”](#) created the Harlem Doll Palace and ran it for over two decades after retiring as a schoolteacher. In this homage to her work, created by New York’s [Alva Puppet Theater](#), we enter the interior of the doll palace and learn of the history of dolls of all kinds, from fashion and celebrity dolls to topsy-turvy dolls. Black women’s creations are portrayed with reverence as each doll comes to life and tells her story. We also learn more about Aunt Len and her mission to make the joy of dolls accessible while preserving precious specimens. By exploring history as told through the fragile perspective of a doll, Aunt Len brings out each doll’s story while forging a deep connection with them, most of whom see her as their rescuer.



*The Harlem Doll Palace*, presented by Alva Puppet Theater at the 2026 Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival  
Credit: [Richard Termine](#)

Of all her preservation work, collecting Black dolls was the dearest to her heart, as she knew how important it was for Black children to see themselves reflected in the world. The drama waxes and wanes as Aunt Len and her dolls endure robberies, floods, and unscrupulous collectors.

Brown Nurse Doll (Thalya David) does her best to mend everyone—until it is her turn to be nursed after breaking a leg. Army Talking Doll (a Thomas Edison invention played with military precision by Mecca Akbar) finds her place in the entourage by being the ersatz bookkeeper and keeping track of exactly how many dolls are in the collection on any given day following each battle. Playwright and show creator Alva Rogers as Aunt Len sings her heart out in several numbers. The most moving and powerful scenes are between Early (Charlotte Lily Gaspard) and Hannah (Marcella Murray), two child dolls from the antebellum south attempting to have a friendship in the midst of the awful power dynamics of slavery. *The Harlem Doll Palace* seamlessly connects the world of dolls and puppets, creating a parallel world where deep and complex historical dynamics can be explored. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***The House***

The title setting in Denmark's Sofie Krog Theatre's *The House* takes up more space than your average dollhouse but less than a tiny home. It also happens to be a crematorium that rotates and undulates, eventually spilling its secrets and bloody content. This comedic horror thriller is less scary than it is endearing. Tiny human hand puppets fall prey to their own greed and paranoia, only to be removed from their spirit (a tiny light), which will then humorously occupy any other living being nearby. This is how a murdered old aunt occupies the dog long enough to let her disowned, criminally inclined sons back into the will, expunging her greedy niece-in-law and cowardly husband and exerting her control from beyond the grave (as any old aunt must). I could almost see the spirit of Mister Rogers's Lady Elaine (who always creeped me out—I stayed for Daniel Striped Tiger) in the evil countenance of Flora, the niece who plots the woman's death.



*The House* from Sofie Krog Theatre  
Credit: Courtesy Sofie Krog Theatre

*The House* is almost Shakespearean in the farcical twistings of its plot, stuffed with clever chase scenes, but features many delightful creepy details: fluttering curtains, doors swaying open and shut, little lights flickering on and off, the lights of the crematorium flaring up, tiny puppets tiptoeing, stomping their feet, or creeping around with axes in hand. Sofie Krog and David Faraco have created a tale that is perfectly complex and delightfully simple, combining the fraught dramas of adulthood with the easy childhood joy of a puppet theater. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***The Left Hand of Darkness***

By featuring performers that look *enough* like us, puppetry's estranging powers can tangle with humanity's "big questions." The work of American writer Ursula K. Le Guin is acclaimed for deploying science fiction and fantasy conventions in order to interrogate many of those same questions. As a result, [Untitled Theatre Company No. 61](#) and [Yara Arts Group](#)'s adaptation of Le Guin's 1969 novel, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, presented in the eighth annual Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, is an ideal blend of source material and performance.

---

Presented as the reports of Terran narrator Genly Ai, *The Left Hand of Darkness* immerses its audience in both the political intrigue and the inherent culture clash of intergalactic diplomacy. The majority of the play's first half is performed by an ensemble of five, wielding bunraku-style rod puppets and narrated by Winter Jones and Miguel Long, with Genly's secondary sources presented in prerecorded shadow puppet films. Gethen's denizens are ambisexual, displaying no fixed gender and entering kemmer every 26 days, a process by which they present variable sexual characteristics.



*The Left Hand of Darkness*, a coproduction of [Untitled Theatre Company No. 61](#) and [Yara Arts Group](#), adapted from the novel by Ursula K. Le Guin

Credit: Courtesy Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival

In the second act, Jones and Long appear on stage as Estraven and Genly, as their relationship thaws and becomes greater than diplomacy. The shift from wood and cloth to flesh and bone hits hard; when we see each other for who we are rather than what is unfamiliar, we become real to each other, an invaluable lesson as staged by Edward Einhorn and Tom Lee. The second act's coup de theatre, where a white curtain is manipulated to represent Gethen's snowy landscape, is astounding in its simplicity and effect. [Michael Zerang](#)'s music and sound design, meanwhile, situates the audience well in the unfamiliar atmosphere. Tackling questions of otherness, *The Left Hand of Darkness* is an adaptation delighting in strangeness, particularly as a means of destroying prejudice. (Rob Silverman Ascher)

### ***The Matchbox Shows***

*The Matchbox Shows* starts with creator [Laura Heit](#) sitting at a table with a glass of wine, serenely walking us through some tableaux featuring her tiny matchboxes. Her whimsical art is arranged as a series of vignettes, then cast onto a large screen (because they are so tiny), but they tell colossal tales, like how Miss Pink Tights attempts a daring tightrope walk, or the story of a sausage fairy, or the journey of the amazing cannonball bunny.



Laura Heit in *The Matchbox Shows*  
Credit: Courtesy Laura Heit

The fairy tales are juxtaposed with stories of real life. An art teacher decides to run away for the life he truly wanted. A friend leaps from a rooftop. Over a quarter of a century, Heit has amassed quite a few stories and toured around the globe with the most efficient yet most flammable tour gear imaginable. Due to the plethora of stories, Heit can swap them out so it's a different show each time. The finale, *27 Pictures of Myself Naked* really brings it to a comic conclusion. Heit's miniature treasures added an essential, intimate vibe to a festival that has grown very large over the past 11 years. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***Oil Pressure Vibrator***

In *Oil Pressure Vibrator* from South Korea, the most abstract of the puppet festival shows I saw this year, the puppets are a shadow self to the puppeteer, [Geumhyung Jeong](#), representing her masculine side as she declares herself a hermaphrodite and begins a peculiar quest.

For at least 17 years, the artist has been honing and documenting this laboratory experience, which has the feel of a research project, on her sexual independence and eventual destruction via union with a construction excavator.



Geumhyung Jeong in *Oil Pressure Vibrator*  
Credit: Gajin Kim

To get us there with her, Jeong sits in front of her laptop and presents the premise in her native Korean. Accentuating the idea of it being a clinical presentation of research, her tone remains measured and calm. Subtitles accompany her videos, each presented as an inquiry into the next step of her sexual perspective. She explains how she no longer has sex with men, and begins having sex with her partner, the other half of herself, which she considers the manly half.

She accomplishes this by projecting that half into the objects she operates—a mask, mannequin parts, a vacuum tube—the objects becoming increasingly uncanny and powerful as her own pleasure eventually dulls. In spite of this projection, the presentation is never comical, lewd, personal, or even romantic. Things remain impersonal. It's not until she comes across a construction site one day that she recognizes the ultimate object of masculine sexuality: an excavator. She decides on the spot that this is what she needs to control in order to experience sexual completion.

The tone shifts from a more opaque performance art presentation to documentary style with a story arc, with Jeong going through the complicated process of becoming a licensed excavator operator, earning the right to rent and operate one as she sees fit. The culmination of the show satisfies her fantasy at last, as we see her on the beach naked, then transformed symbolically into a giant naked sand sculpture of herself reclining, then driving a giant excavator over to that sand sculpture. I'll leave the rest to your imagination.

Jeong's background in performance art and choreography informs her work as much as puppetry does, but there is very little movement from her on the stage. Most of the motion stems from the projections that illustrate the body of her research. She keeps the distance from her own experience by observing the screen with us, except for one brief moment when she operates a toy excavator in an intimate way. The result is a measured performance that occasionally elicits a chuckle due to the absurdity or tension that builds, but which ultimately questions the power dynamics and boundaries of sexuality. Weirdly satisfying. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***The Sex Lives of Puppets***

The puppets featured in *The Sex Lives of Puppets* by the UK's [Blind Summit Theatre](#) are some of the truest characters you'll come across in the puppet realm—probably because their stories, told directly to the audience, are based on actual interviews with people about their sex lives. Many of the puppets are middle-aged, and they have stories to tell, opinions, hang-ups, grievances, quirks: in short, all of the stuff that makes a sex life interesting to unravel, not to mention often hilarious (or even tragic) to hear about.



"Harry and Franny" in *The Sex Lives of Puppets*, presented by Blind Summit Theatre  
Credit: [Charlie Lyne](#)

There's the gay couple in the senior center, one of whom only discovered he was gay at retirement, the other who can't express his love verbally but who lights up on drag night. There's the guy on a long-awaited Vegas trip who has been excited about an orgy for a while now, but when his wife calls to talk about her newly discovered breast lump, his infantile outrage belies something deeply insecure about him. A widower who works in finance tries to help a neighbor with a plumbing emergency, which somehow leads to a hand job, and true love via cat role-playing in the bedroom.

All of the expected topics are under the microscope: fidelity, kinks, roles, positions, frequency, and of course the nature of love itself. The narrative thrives on its unapologetic shock value, but also dips frequently and without sappiness into the human need for affection, touch, connection, belonging. It's a refreshing view on the whole gamut of sexuality, and the puppeteers themselves (Mark Down, who cocreated the show with Ben Keaton, Isobel Griffiths, Dale Wylde, and Elliot Liburd) add so much nuance to the performance with their many accents and their palpable joy at playing the various roles.

There's this thing that happens with contemporary puppetry, the way each puppeteer mirrors the expressions and motions of the puppets, and it is an endearing artifact of the connection between the operator and the puppet. In this case, it is doubled, as each puppet is operated by two puppeteers, one doing the speaking and operating the head, and one doing the arms and/or lower body. It creates a captivating energy—almost mystical—because now it's a trinity of beings communicating one idea to another trinity of beings, taking the whole thing into uncanny valley territory. Not a bad way to clear some chakras over the winter, really, and a great conversation starter for partners and friends on the trip home after the show. (Kimzyn Campbell)

### ***Trust Me for a While***

If the "actor's nightmare" is being forced to perform despite not knowing the lines, then a "puppeteer's nightmare" might look something like the situation in Plexus Polaire's *Trust Me For a While*. The French-Norwegian theater group, already represented in this year's Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival with their production of *A Doll's House* (see review in this article), also presented this deceptively simple piece about the battle between ventriloquist and dummy. What begins as a run-of-the-mill ventriloquism demonstration from Pedro Hermelin Vélez becomes a philosophical disquisition on the nature of free will when Terry, his wide-eyed puppet, admits that he's "having an existential crisis" and can't go on.



Credit: [Vincent Arbelet](#)

You might be able to guess that Vélez loses the room at this point. For the rest of *Trust Me For A While*'s all-too-brief 50 minutes, Terry wrests control, invoking Schrödinger's cat (with the help of a fat gray cat puppet) to illustrate his quandary, and asking, "Who is really in control?" After all, without Terry, there's no show, definitely not at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival.

Plexus Polaire artistic director Yngvild Aspeli's production is deceptively simple, using three wheeled curtains to great effect, playing with scale in a phantasmagorical sequence where Vélez gets a taste of his own medicine. At times, *Trust Me For A While* feels stuck in one gear, but at least it explores that ground well. As the crisis hits its apex, Terry tells Pedro, "The answer to Schrödinger's paradox is . . . a puppet." Heady words for the audience of an international puppet festival, but *Trust Me For A While* returns to the status quo at the end, the classical ideal for a comedy. *Trust Me For A While* is excellent, as both a freaky short subject and an anarchic deconstruction of puppeteering. (Rob Silverman Ascher)

# AMERICAN THEATRE

SIGHTLINES © FEBRUARY 26, 2026 0 COMMENTS

## What Was Caryl Churchill Smoking? And Other Chicago Highs

*This month's Sightlines checks in on a 'smoky riff' on a well-known Churchill play, Chicago theatre news, and a rising local lighting designer.*

By [Jerald Raymond Pierce](#)



## Around the Water Cooler

Grab your water bottle. Let's fill up and chat about some recent theatre goings before we head back to our desks.

Elsewhere in the *Reader*, I really enjoyed reading [Rob Silverman Ascher and Kimzyn Campbell's coverage](#) of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival that took place in January. From some Ibsen to an adaptation of Ursula K. Le Guin, through a variety of genres and topics, Ascher and Campbell were on the ground for nine of the shows in the festival, plus a local alternative for audience members who couldn't get tickets to the festival.