



Advance Program Notes

Blair Thomas & Co. Puppet Theater
In the Shadow of Moby Dick
Friday, February 5, 2016, 7:30 PM

These Advance Program Notes are provided online for our patrons who like to read about performances ahead of time. Printed programs will be provided to patrons at the performances. Programs are subject to change.

Blair Thomas & Co. Puppet Theater *In the Shadow of Moby Dick*

Conceived by Blair Thomas
Adapted by the company

Production Staff

Greg Allen, *direction*
Blair Thomas, *production design*
Michael Smith, *songwriter*
Michael Zerang, *sound score*
Ana Kuzamic, *costumes*
Sarah Hughey, *lighting*
John Boeshe, *projections*
Joe Burke, *projections assistant*
Tyler Culligan, *puppet builder*
Beth Uber, *costume construction*

The Monastic Order of Ancient Mariners

Michael Montenegro, *puppeteer*
Michael Smith, *balladeer*
Blair Thomas, *puppeteer*
Michael Zerang, *musician*

In the Shadow of Moby Dick is a National Performance Network (NPN) Creation Fund/Forth Fund Project co-commissioned by the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago in partnership with Virginia Tech, College of St. Ben's/St. John's University, and NPN. The Creation Fund is supported by the Doris Duke Charitable Foundation, Ford Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts (a federal agency). The Forth Fund is supported by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. For more information, please visit www.npnweb.org.

Additional lead commissioning support for *In the Shadow of Moby Dick* is provided by Elizabeth A. Liebman and The Jim Henson Foundation. Further support comes from Ellen Stone Belic.

A Note from Blair Thomas

Melville's singular achievement in writing *Moby-Dick* was articulating a prescient vision of the American experience that resonates for us today. The 30 men of the *Pequod* represented a nation state driven by the charismatic Captain Ahab, who led a righteous mission to rid the world of evil as Ahab perceived it to exist in the white whale Moby Dick. Melville's book resounds with biblical themes, principally a central theme from the book of Job: if God exists, how is there evil in the world? This question leads Ahab to challenge the authority of God by going after His agent of chaos, the great Leviathan Moby Dick.

But Ahab could not have acted without his crew. Our play imagines a time after the rescue of Ishmael, when a group of men, who are still wrestling with the issues raised by Ahab and his crew, attempt to liberate themselves from torment by forming themselves as the Monastic Order of Ancient Mariners. Their performance is part ritual, part religious service that functions as the Rhythm recounted by Coleridge's famous *Ancient Mariner*. Ahab's story is a cautionary tale, but the stories of the other sailors of the *Pequod* resonate anew with the performing members of this new devotional order.

I am grateful to Ruth Waalkes for her faith in my artistic work and for initiating the commissioning support that has made this performance possible. My company extends our gratitude to all the staff at Center for the Arts for our two-week residency here at Virginia Tech.

—Blair Thomas

Blair Thomas & Company

Blair Thomas & Company is a Chicago-based organization devoted to the advancement of contemporary puppetry through intimate original productions, festival and guest presentations, training opportunities, and educational programs. We hold the conviction that puppetry forges a cathartic connection in audiences of all ages and across social, political, and economic classes.

Led by Artistic Director Blair Thomas, the company's productions have twice garnered the highest international honor for original work in the medium, the UNIMA Excellence in Puppetry Award. In addition, Thomas has received the Illinois Arts Council Fellowship Award, the After Dark Award, and a number of Joseph Jefferson Citations. On faculty at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago for 25 years, Thomas has taught at the University of Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, Columbia College Chicago, and held the first-ever Jim Henson Artist-in-Residence position at the University of Maryland, College Park. Co-founder and past artistic director of Redmoon, Thomas has vigorously contributed to the Chicago theatre scene as an actor, director, puppeteer, designer, and teacher for three decades, securing his status as "Chicago's unofficial puppeteer-general" (*TimeOut*).

Blair Thomas & Co. has produced more than a dozen original puppet theatre works in its 14-year history, including *The Vinegar Works*, a toy theatre staging of Edward Gorey's little books; *Cabaret of Desire*, an adaptation of short works by Federico Garcia Lorca; and *The Ox-herder's Tale*, an interpretation of the 10 Buddhist paintings of enlightenment. For young audiences, Blair Thomas & Co. has adapted Oscar Wilde's *The Selfish Giant* and staged a fantasy inspired by Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*.

Thomas has been creating work inspired by Melville's *Moby-Dick* since the late 1990s. The current performance is the product of five years of development and experimentation.

Blair Thomas & Co. also produces the biennial Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, a two-week even that unites 12 major Chicago institutions in a celebration of the best of art form. Every other January, the Festival produces nearly 100 events for an audience of 14,000.

For more information, please visit www.blairthomas.org.

Engagement Activities

Wednesday, January 27, 2016, 10:00 AM

CLASS VISIT: MASTER OF ARTS STUDENTS IN THE MATERIAL CULTURE AND PUBLIC HUMANITIES PROGRAM

Hosted by Rachel Gross, visiting assistant professor; Brian Britt, department chair and professor; Department of Religion and Culture

Visiting artist Blair Thomas speaks with master's students in the School of Visual Arts' and Department of Religion and Culture's joint program in Material Culture and Public Humanities on the literary and aesthetic challenges of adapting Herman Melville's *Moby Dick* to the stage.

Wednesday, January 27, 2016

WORKSHOP: CONTEMPORARY BUNRAKU PERFORMANCE PRACTICES

Hosted by Les Epstein, teacher

Students in an American Romantics class at Roanoke's Community High School participate in a workshop focused on the Japanese puppet theatre style Bunraku, led by visiting artist Blair Thomas.

Monday, February 1, 2016

FaculTea DIALOGUE WITH STUDENTS IN THE RESIDENTIAL COLLEGE AT WEST AMBLER JOHNSTON

Hosted by Matthew Gabriele, associate professor and coordinator of Medieval & Early Modern Studies program, Department of Religion and Culture; faculty principal, Residential College at West Ambler Johnston

Visiting artist Blair Thomas participates in an informal dialogue with undergraduate students in the Residential College at West Ambler Johnston on the adaptation of *Moby Dick* to the stage.

Thursday, February 4, 2016

SCHOOL-DAY PERFORMANCE: BLAIR THOMAS & CO. PUPPET THEATER, MOBY DICK

Blair Thomas & Co. Puppet Theater perform for students in grades 9-12 from the City of Radford and Floyd, Giles, Montgomery, Pulaski, Roanoke, and Tazewell Counties.

Special thanks to Matthew Gabriele, Brian Britt, Rachel Gross, Les Epstein, Josh Chapman, and Brian Counihan

In the Galleries

Visit the galleries quickly, because this will be your last chance to see these exhibitions! Our galleries will close on Sunday, February 7, 2016 to begin preparation for our spring exhibitions. Be sure to check out our winter exhibitions before it's too late!

CHARLIE BROUWER: KNOWN/UNKNOWN

December 3, 2015-February 7, 2016

Ruth C. Horton Gallery

Charlie Brouwer, an established artist and resident of Floyd County well known for his sculpture, has taken over the lower gallery and built a one-of-a-kind immersive experience. Using his growing ladder structure as a projection surface, video, light, and sound pulsate throughout the space as clouds make an appearance, undulating across the ladders' surfaces.

the sun that never sets: New Paintings by Paul Ryan

December 3, 2015–February 7, 2016

Miles C. Horton Jr. Gallery, Sherwood Payne Quillen '71 Reception Gallery

Cardboard boxes and recyclable products are repurposed in the structured, playful, and vibrant paintings of Staunton, Virginia-based artist and art critic Paul Ryan. Flattened packaging materials and iconic forms ranging from hands to smokestacks dance across the canvas as abstract shapes emerge from the negative space underneath. Desire, consumption, accumulation, and mindless waste—what themes will you see in these works?

Coming soon

DIANA COOPER: GRAND LOBBY WALL MURAL

February 11, 2016–Spring 2018

Mural Unveiling and Artist Talk: February 11, 2016, 5:30 PM

Grand Lobby

GALLERY HOURS

Tuesday-Friday, 10:00 a.m.-6:00 p.m.; Saturday-Sunday, 10:00 a.m.-4:00 p.m.; interesting and free!