



2017
Festival Report



PRESENTED BY





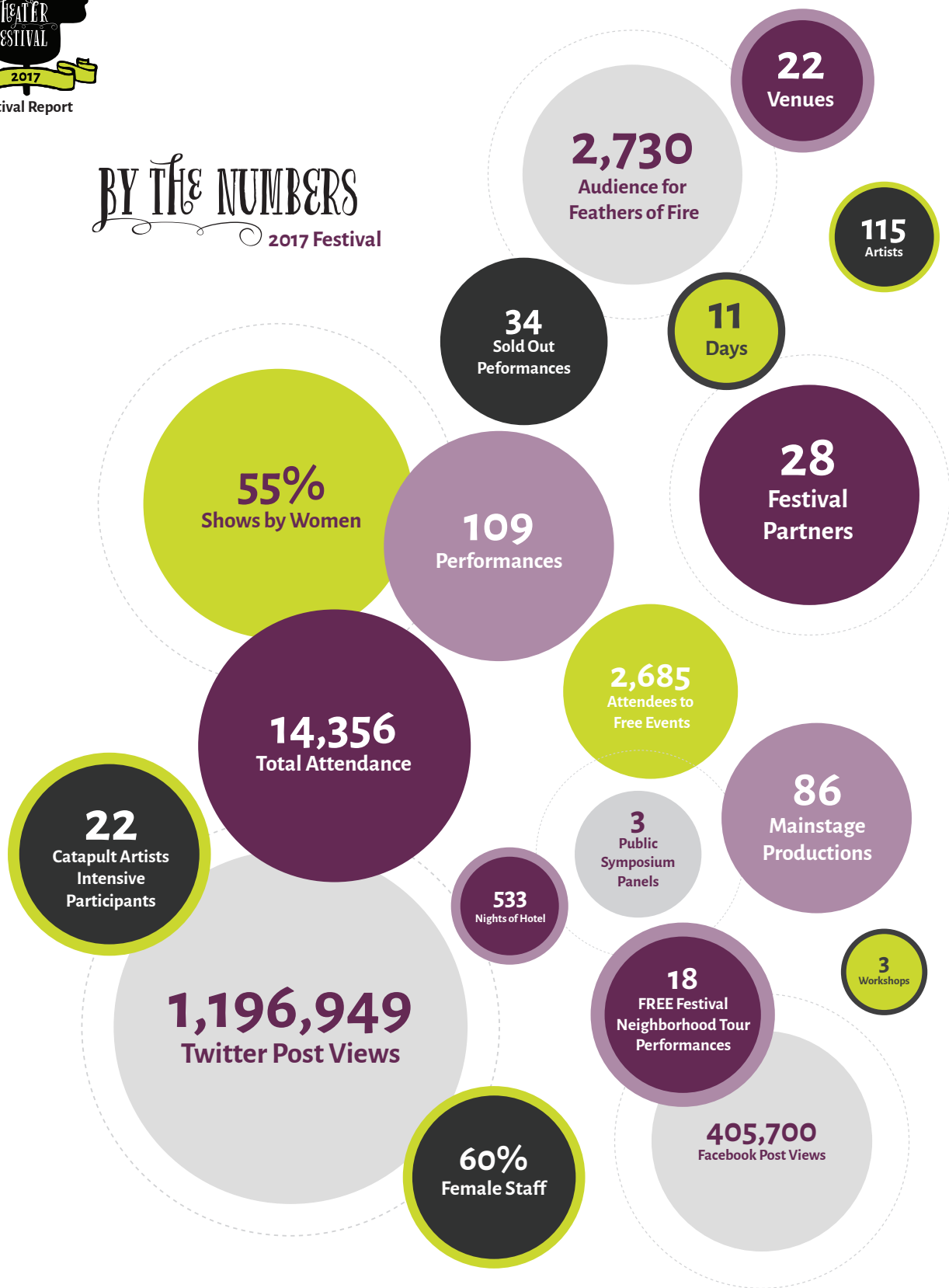
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BY THE NUMBERS

2017 Festival





SUMMARY

From January 19-29, 2017, Blair Thomas & Co.

(BT&Co.) presented the 2nd biennial **Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival**, featuring

109 performances, workshops, panel discussions, and family puppetry activities spanning 11 days at 22 venues across the city. By all measures, the Festival grew in strength and cultural impact since its creation in 2015. The number of presentations increased by 41%, the number of venues doubled, and the cultural partners collaborating on the Festival grew from 12 to 28. Of the 109 performances, 34 sold out completely including the largest house (Studebaker Theater, 746 seats). BT&Co. also increased its ability to influence the artistic impact of the Festival and to secure earned income by independently presenting eight full productions, piloting a new professional development program called The Catapult, and presenting 18 free performances across the city with the Festival Neighborhood Tour.



Open Eye Figure Theatre



Opening Night Audience

In addition to expanding the volume of programming, the Festival expanded its scope of work behind the scenes as well. While BT&Co. approached the Festival as primarily a collaborative marketing initiative in 2015, the company undertook several new aspects of Festival management in 2017. The 2017 Festival welcomed 115 artists and visiting dignitaries from five continents who spoke nine different languages. Festival staff managed support for travel, logistics, and hospitality including securing 533 nights of lodging at the Warwick Allerton hotel. The Festival also funded and facilitated acquisition of international visas for artists this year.

These enhancements produced remarkable results. The Festival brought puppetry to a local, national, and international audience of 14,356 people. Patrons came from 198 Illinois ZIP codes and 34 US states as well as Hong Kong, Australia, Sweden, Poland, Mexico, and Canada. In addition to this remarkable reach in attendance, BT&Co. doubled its modest donor base and reached a record number of people via the press and social media.

The Festival is poised to take on 2019 with continued support, with the contracting of Festival partners, identification of new artists, and cultivation of leading donors already underway.



Business Manager Kelley Dorhauer and Grants Manager Alex Monroe staff Front of House



ACTIVITIES

The 2017 Festival presented a wide variety of programming, including performances for adults and families, workshops for artists, events in neighborhoods outside of the city center, and open-forum panel discussions for the general public.

- | | |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 86 Mainstage Productions | 3 Public symposium panels |
| 18 Neighborhood Tour Productions | 3 Workshops |
| 8 Family Drop-in Opportunities | 6 Cultivation Events |
| 1 Four-day Artists Intensive, The Catapult | |



French company Plexus Polaire performs *Cendres* by Norwegian Director Yngvild Aspeli

Through its **mainstage productions**, the Festival offered audiences the singular opportunity to experience high quality puppet theater from numerous cultures and to witness local work in its global context. The Festival presented established artists of international profile while also providing a platform for new and experimental puppet theater across puppetry styles. Presenters across the city hosted performances in fully-equipped theaters, cabarets, and even a few rarely seen spaces. Artist performances revealed the power of puppetry to entertain, captivate, and facilitate discourse among contemporary audiences. It began as it ended—with full houses and standing ovations at an opening night featuring the masterful work of French company Plexus Polaire and with closing performances by Iranian artist Hamid Rahmaniaan,

which garnered the largest audiences of all (2,730). Throughout the Festival artists used puppetry to illuminate a range of forms, content and cultures: examine familial struggles with step siblings and divorce (*Manual Cinema*), share ancient Persian fairytales (*Feathers of Fire*), comment on losses caused by the mining industry (*Silencio Blanco*), and explore the roots of human desire in a measured battle with a lecherous vacuum (*Geumhyung Jeong*).



Director Hamid Rahmaniaan's Persian Epic, *Feathers of Fire*



(l. to r.) Magali Chouinard; Schroeder Cherry; Detroit-based Interstate Arts with their Director Shoshanna Utchenik

The **Festival Neighborhood Tour** brought an appreciation of puppetry to many corners of the city. These 18 free events invited families to share in a full day of performance, or to drop in for performances and puppet workshops as they pleased. Artist Magali Chouinard of Montreal performed the silent meditation *The White Woman*, Schroeder Cherry of Baltimore performed the historically informative *Underground Railroad... Not a Subway*, and Interstate Arts from Detroit celebrated the universal human experience of eating with *Play With Your FOOD!* Free performances took place at Navy Pier, the Chicago Cultural Center, Marquette Park, Hamilton Park, Garfield Park, Calumet Park, and Garfield Park Conservatory.



Family Activities

Several **openly structured family opportunities** provided patrons with the opportunity to see the creative process behind puppetry. At the Chicago Cultural Center, people were able to drop in on works-in-progress and open studio presentations for Stephanie Diaz' installation and Jabberwocky Marionettes. At the Reva and David Logan Center, four artists welcomed Festival goers to open studios and work-in-progress presentations.

A new program, **The Catapult**, offered practicing artists and those seeking to advance their understanding and exposure to contemporary puppetry a four-day intensive Festival experience. Through the curated program, participants gained exclusive access to the Festival and the local, national, and international artists performing within it. This pilot program accepted 22 participants and sold out within two weeks. Generous funding from individual donors provided four of the participants with need-based scholarships to the program.

The Ellen van Volkenberg Puppetry Symposium brought together practicing Festival artists with scholars to consider the intersection of puppetry with other disciplines and ideas. Topics included *Puppetry and the Human Body*, *Puppets as Narrative*, and *Literary Adaptation to Puppetry*. Two sessions took place at the MCA Chicago, with a third session at the Studebaker Theater in conjunction with the production of *Feathers of Fire*. The Symposium was presented by the Gray Center for Arts and Inquiry at the University of Chicago in cooperation with Blair Thomas & Co. and the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago.



Puppets as Narrative Panel Discussion



Public puppetry and related topic workshops featuring Puzzle Theatre, Jabberwocky Marionettes, and Silencio Blanco educated audiences throughout the Festival in addition to exclusive artist workshops for Catapult participants.



Théâtre Puzzle

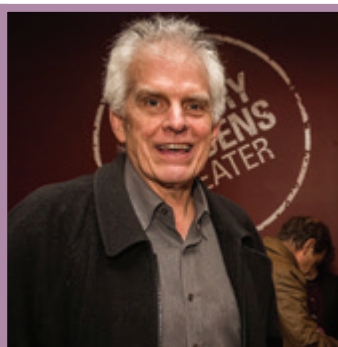


Puppeteer Schroeder Cherry with Board Members Cheryl Lynn Bruce and Claire Rice (Chair)

Festival celebrations included events before, during, and after the Festival. In the months preceding, Board members and volunteers coordinated the series of three Living Room Tour events, comprised of dinner and performances in private homes in Logan Square, Bronzeville, and Hyde Park. For the Opening Night Celebration on the first Friday of the Festival, the Board of Directors welcomed funders, donors, partners, artists, press, and cultural leaders to Victory Gardens Theater following the opening performance of *Cendres* by France's Plexus Polaire. The Festival partnered with Pasfarda Arts & Cultural Exchange to host a Persian tea backstage after each performance of *Feathers of Fire*. The Festival also assisted with a closing celebration for patrons at Links Hall featuring heavy hors d'oeuvres in connection with the program *Nasty, Brutish and Short*.



Paul Teruel & Katie Collins, Center for Arts Partnerships Columbia College Chicago



Mark Kelly, Commissioner, Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events



Interim Board Chair Chuck Thurow talks to guests at Opening Night



ARTISTIC OUTCOMES

Celebrating some of the most remarkable works in contemporary puppetry, the festival...signifies Chicago's growing reputation as a leader in the art form's renaissance.

– Hedy Weiss, *Chicago Sun-Times*

Chicago Festival shows off a thriving international art form.

– *The New York Times*

International Artists (7)

Magali Chouinard (Canada)
Geumhyung Jeong (South Korea)
Plexus Polaire (France)
Puzzle Theatre (Canada)
Silencio Blanco (Chile)
Teatro dei Piedi (Italy)
Vincent De Rooij (Netherlands)

National Artists (11)

Schroeder Cherry (MD)
Great Small Works (NY)
Interstate Arts (MI)
Liz Joyce (NY)
Jesse Mooney-Bullock (OH)
Narcissister (NY)
Open Eye Figure Theatre (MN)
Hamid Rahmanian (NY)
Molly Ross (FL)
Liz Schachterle (MN)
Michael Sommers (MN)

Local Artists (10)

Christopher Knowlton
Lookingglass Theatre Company
Mandala Ensemble & I Gusti
Manual Cinema
Michael Montenegro
Nasty Brutish and Short
The Neo-Futurists
Rough House
Myra Su
Vanessa Valliere



The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival seeks to radically redefine the popular notion of the art form and cement Chicago's place as its international epicenter. Performances are carefully curated to select art forms and content adjacent to puppetry itself thereby helping to widen interest in and understanding of the form while also increasing its audiences. **In 2017, 18% of audience survey respondents reported that they had never seen a puppet show before.**

In an age of contemporary, digital culture, puppetry thrives in defiance of the commonplace high-speed, high-tech conventions. At the Festival, audience members indulge their desire to be exposed to the world, inspired by creativity, and surprised by new artistry. The usually low-tech nature of puppetry is not only gaining understanding, but feeding a populous hungry for real experiences that surprise them, connect them across cultures, styles and places, and move them toward their own purpose. **In fact, 34% of audience survey respondents shared that they attended the Festival in order to energize their own creativity and 54% indicated international cultural performances as "very important" to them.** Pervasive coverage of the 2017 Festival revealed a growing national interest in puppetry and Chicago's Festival is guiding people to it.

Chicago Map of Performance Locations





Michael Montenegro

Work presented at the Festival enjoyed broad coverage and acclaim from the press and high demand at the box office. Silencio Blanco's "artists manipulate sublimely crude-looking puppets with tender precision to tell a wordless story of coal mining" (Laura Collins-Hughes, *The New York Times*). Michael Montenegro's *Kick the Clown...* played to four sold out audiences and a well-sold added performance. Audiences packed the Studebaker Theater for *Feathers of Fire*—a Persian epic the size of a movie screen. As funding for the National Endowment for the Arts is potentially on the chopping block, *The New York Times* referenced the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival in March 2017 as a reason federal funding should remain in place.



Silencio Blanco



The Festival also had a significant impact on puppetry's artist community both personally and professionally. In post-show speeches, the performers of *Feathers of Fire* revealed that the travel ban may halt their next month of touring and pleaded for international compassion and local action. Audiences rose to their feet in solidarity. High turnout prompted several local artists to add performances, and one featured international artist signed their next booking upon meeting a presenter immediately following one evening's performance. The journal *Puppeteers of America* will feature an analysis of the impact on participants of The Catapult and *American Theater Magazine* is printing a follow-up piece on the Festival aimed at the theater field.



AUDIENCE & BOX OFFICE

Because partner institutions handled all ticket sales in 2015, BT&Co. had virtually no existing ticket buyer information at the start of the 2017 Festival. The organization's goal to build up the puppetry community demands consistent, targeted communication with all Festival patrons. In addition, 2015 survey responses revealed that ticket buyers wanted more convenience and the ability to purchase shows across venues in one transaction (a "one-stop shop" experience). This feedback led to the creation of a shared box office capable of selling tickets to shows at all 22 venues.



How many people attended?

14,356	Total Festival Attendance
9,451	Tickets through Puppet Fest box office (other tickets sold via venues)
2,685	Attendance to free events



How did our donor base grow?

Number of donors **doubled** by the end of the 2017 Festival



Where did our Patrons Come From?

360	Zip Codes
198	Illinois Zip Codes
9	Countries



How did our database grow?

1,681	Mailing list pre 2017 Festival
3,684	Mailing list post 2017 Festival

In partnership with the League of Chicago Theatres, BT&Co. identified Spektrix as the best ticketing platform to handle the Festival's size and scope, and launched the program in the summer of 2017. Thanks to the excellent partnership and expertise of each organization's staff, the Festival box office supported ticketing for all shows, integrated with the Festival's website, created accounts for our existing patrons, provided discount codes to encourage multiple ticket sales, and more.

SPEKTRIX



PR AND SOCIAL MEDIA

With support from PR and social media professionals, the Festival achieved enormous reach in press and on social media.

1,196,949
405,700
9,200
994

Twitter post views (including retweets)
Facebook post views
Fan engagements (likes, comments, shares, etc.)
New fans and followers on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter

TV coverage:



Key Press:



New York Times (national and international editions), **Chicago Tribune**, **Chicago Sun-Times**, **Midwest Living**, **Crain's Chicago Business**





2017 FESTIVAL PARTNERS

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 Beverly Arts Center
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 Cards Against Humanity
 The Center for Community Arts
 Partnerships at Columbia College
 Chicago Children's Theater
 Chicago Cultural Center
 City of Chicago DCASE
 Garfield Park Conservatory
 Gray Center for Arts & Inquiry
 Hamilton Park
 The House Theatre Chicago
 Instituto Cervantes de Chicago

Istituto di Cultura di Italia
 The League of Chicago Theatres
 Links Hall
 Lookingglass Theatre Co.
 Mandala South Asian Arts
 Marquette Park
 Multilingual Connections
 Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
 Navy Pier
 The Neo-Futurists
 Pasfarda Arts & Cultural Exchange
 Reva and David Logan Center for the Arts
 Victory Gardens
 The Warwick-Allerton Hotel



Links Hall





THE FESTIVAL TEAM



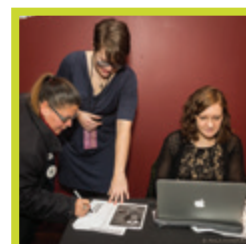
Blair Thomas, Founder and Artistic Director
Photo by Saverio Traglia

Blair Thomas	Artistic Director*
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Kelley Dorhauer	Business Manager
Alex Monroe	Grants Manager
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Meggie Keiser	Development Associate
Nic Barnum	Production Manager
Dayna Calderon	FNT Production Manager
Julia Rohed/LOCT	Box Office Manager/Staff
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Sarah Goone	Catapult Coordinator
Jess Mott Wickstrom	Webmaster and Graphic Design
Andy Wickstrom	Video editing
Covey Law	Artists Visas
Jay Kelly/L.C. Williams & Assoc.	Publicist
Sarah Best Strategies	Social Media
Laura Miracle	Workshops
Chris Wooten	Production Asst./Driver
Shelby Shariatzadeh	Logistics/Driver
Sean Gunn	Production/Driver
Samuel Barr	Intern
Molly Bryson	Intern
Breanne Dengler	Intern
Cyrus Stowe	Intern
Zoe Holmes	Production Asst.
Maddy Low	Production Asst.
Nicole Nienow	Production Asst.
Phillip Solomonson	Photographer
Ushers	The Saints

*Full time staff



Jay Kelly of LCWA



Festival Staff at Opening Reception



OPERATIONS

Blair Thomas & Co.'s Role

Blair Thomas & Co.'s role in the Festival expanded in 2017 as curator, coordinator, and presenter. Leveraging strong partnerships and support, the Festival contracted eight shows (Narcissister, Feathers of Fire, Open Eye, Teatro dei Piedi, Magali Chouinard, Schroeder Cherry, Interstate Arts, and Plexus Polaire). This expansion of BT&Co.'s role ensured an artistically complete Festival worthy of the international moniker.

Administrative improvements, such as increased staffing, establishing a permanent office space in the historic Fine Arts Building, and expansion of public-private partnerships, also allowed the organization to meet the increasing expectations to operate at an international level by peers—including the coordination of hospitality, lodging, visa acquisition, and ground transportation.

Travel and Hospitality

The Festival provided substantial hospitality, travel and artist visa support to accommodate the broad cross section of participants at the Festival coming from out of town. The Festival provided local transportation including two vans, drivers and logistical support, taking artists to and from theaters, events and hotels including to the Festival Neighborhood Tour far from the city center. This generous support allowed Festival Partners to commit to bring in national and international talent—some for the first time.

Lodging

The Festival provided lodging for 115 artists and other VIPs traveling to the festival. Thanks to a substantial partnership with The Warwick-Allerton Hotel, the Festival secured a total of 533 nights of high quality accommodations conveniently situated at the center of the Festival venues. Other key visitors were welcomed in local homes.

Visas

The Festival provided ongoing administrative support throughout the visa process. Specialized legal expertise was contracted to secure international work visas for artists. This turned out to be essential as many of the visa processes were accomplished with an expedited turn around time. During the Festival, these visas were soundly in place during what turned out to be an unexpected and disruptive federal travel ban.



Italy's Teatro di Piedi



CIPTF Office in the Historic Fine Arts Building



The Warwick-Allerton Hotel



THE 2019 FESTIVAL



Plans for 2019 are already underway with high hopes as to what will be achieved. Many 2017 partners have already confirmed involvement in 2019. The budget has doubled as the Festival has evolved and Blair Thomas & Co. is seeking support from all sources to make 2019 even more successful than 2017.

The Board, staff, and artists of the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival are grateful for the generous support received from all around Chicago and the globe.

Thank you for supporting our mission to advance the art of puppetry, and to produce and present sophisticated work vital to the cultural life of Chicago and influential nationally and internationally.



SPONSORS

Blair Thomas & Co. gratefully acknowledges the following donors for their generous support of the Festival and Blair Thomas & Co.





This list represents gifts made to Blair Thomas & Co. and the Puppet Festival through February 2017. Please accept our apology and contact us if you notice an error.

FESTIVAL SUPPORTERS

\$10,000-\$50,000

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Up to \$99

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Rough House. Photo by Brave Lux.