

Los Angeles Times

January 29, 2002

LOS ANGELES TIMES

Imago Theatre Sets Out for a Mind Game With Audience

Dance • Blending mime, movement and masks, this company fools the eye and tweaks the brain.

By CHRIS PASTLES
TIMES STAFF WRITER

If your mind is telling you one thing, but your eyes are telling you another, you may be looking at one of the funny, fantastical creatures created by Carol Triffle and Jerry Mouawad, founders and co-directors of Imago Theatre.

Take the Larabatic, one of their creations in the "Frogz" program Friday at Plummer Auditorium in Fullerton.

"It looks like some slug doing some incredible acrobatic feats that are impossible," Mouawad said recently from company offices in Portland, Ore.

That's because the performer's foot is masked to look like a hand and his hand to look like a foot.

"Mind and sight are doing different things to us. You're shocking

yourself into belief and disbelief." Shocking, or rather, delighting people is something Triffle and Mouawad have been doing for years. The two met while studying performing and visual arts in Portland in the late 1970s.

Triffle went on to study with—and eventually become an assistant to—Parisian mime master and teacher Jacques Lecoq. (Julie "The Lion King" Taymor is another Lecoq disciple.)

"The first year, you learn theater mostly by not talking," Triffle said. "You learn how important every-thing is before you talk. If an actor doesn't learn that, you may never see anything else when he comes onstage. You could close your eyes and you wouldn't miss anything."

Taking nonverbal communication as a given, they founded the movement- and mask-based Imago Theatre in 1979, first touring small communities in the Northwest but within six years becoming successful enough to tour internationally as well. The two married in 1989.

"We're pretty well known for work that is idiosyncratic and takes the set design or the lighting design and makes it not a supportive element but a more integral and necessary element," Mouawad said.

They staged Jean-Paul Sartre's "No Exit," for instance, on a 17-square-foot wooden deck suspended on a single point 3 feet off the ground.

"It would start to tip slowly if you went over the balance point," Mouawad said. "Every change, every character coming in... I don't want to say that it was physically represented, but it physicalized the drama as the characters experienced it."

Their show about giant frogs and other creatures, originally called "Frogs, Lizards, Orbs and Slinkys," metamorphosed into the current "Frogz."

Some people have described it as a trip to a strange zoo. "Some of it is like that," Mouawad said. "If you go to a zoo and see a creature you've never seen



Imago Theatre

A pair of illusionary creatures in Imago's "Frogz" Friday in Fullerton. before, your response would not likely be "Why?" but "Wow. What is that? What is it doing? How is it doing it?" That sense of awe of the universe we try to create onstage, with pure humor, pure fun."

Said Triffle: "We put very real creatures in very unreal situations and keep the palms going. It becomes unbetterably absurd."

"Frogz" has five performers and two technicians. (Triffle and Mouawad still perform, but not in this show.)

"It's always the same; it's always different," Mouawad said. "There's a very firm, strong structure in the piece. From that, the performers are always asked to come alive, form spontaneities from events." Their company has a core ensemble of nine and operates on an annual budget of about \$600,000, with 70% coming from ticket sales and touring revenue, the rest from government, corporations, foundations and private individuals.

The Fullerton performance is Imago Theatre will present "Frogz" on Friday at 8 p.m. at Plummer Auditorium, 201 E. Chapman Ave., Fullerton. Part of Cal State Fullerton's PARR (Professional Artists in Residence) Celebrity Series. \$22.50 to \$27.50. (714) 278-3371.