

# Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

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WITH THE KIDS

## Talent unmasked

The Virginia Avenue Project's "In the Valley of Mist" takes up where "The Lion King" left off.

By Brenda Rees, Special to The Times

Since "The Lion King" packed up and left Los Angeles in January, theatergoers are hard pressed to find a lavish spectacle in which masterful puppetry and masks depict a cast of animal and mythical characters.

Until now.

Taking its cue from the popular Disney musical, the staff at the Virginia Avenue Project in Santa Monica is mounting an original play that will put a herd of camels, mystical genies and a 10-foot-high demon puppet onstage.

Written and co-directed by Rob Harrison, "In the Valley of Mist" is the story of Raj, a young boy who runs away from his village into the desert. In his adventures, Raj encounters a camel prince, conniving royalty and a strange paradise -- the misty valley of the title -- where he discovers his true identity.

"This is not a goofy, cartoony children's piece," says Bob Beuth, the co-director who also spent nearly a year creating 50 handmade masks and puppets for the show. The story is a magical journey that mirrors the production itself.

"When I first read Rob's book, which was a wonderful story, I thought this would be an impossible show to bring to life," says Beuth, explaining that, in addition to camels and djinn (genies) onstage, the play features a violent dust storm, a bustling village and a surreal "camel heaven."

"In essence, we wanted to give our kids a 'Lion King' experience on a nonprofit budget," says Beuth, who added that the production has been a labor of love for those involved.

Indeed, the Virginia Avenue Project is best known for its outreach program, which pairs disadvantaged youth with theater professionals. With their adult mentors, the kids, ages 6 to 18, learn playwriting, poetry and acting; throughout the year, student work is showcased with evenings of plays and performances.

In its 10th year, the Virginia Avenue Project mounts a full-length play every three to four years with other L.A.-based arts organizations, but "In the Valley of Mist" proved a much larger undertaking. "We've never had storytelling on a massive scale like this before," says founder and artistic director Leigh Curran.

For the 18 children and professional actors who will be onstage during the one-hour performances, the masks have to be an emotional extension of their characters, according to Harrison. "This is ... a tough skill to master, even for our professionals. The cast just amazes me."

### 'In the Valley of Mist'

**When:** March 7-16, Friday and Saturday at 7:30 p.m.; Saturday and Sunday matinees at 3 p.m. The production is for children 5 and older.

**Where:** The Miles Playhouse, 1130 Lincoln Blvd., Santa Monica

**Cost:** "Pay what you can" donation

**Info:** (310) 264-4224



Mystical  
(Jessica Hopman)