

Los Angeles Times CALENDAR weekend

Thinking really small pays off

By Brenda Rees
Special to The Times

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The backdrop is tiny, but the themes are large. A man unravels emotionally and spiritually. Life and death are confronted.

And it's all done with puppets, in a space the size of a bookshelf.

"Frankenstein: Mortal Toys" will be presented via a 19th century form of miniature — also called toy — theater at the new location of the Velaslavasay Panorama in the West Adams district.

The artistic team of Automata — Janie Geiser and Susan Simpson — are resurrecting the European art form that uses flat, cutout puppets moving across a proscenium stage that is a mere 2 feet tall and 4 feet wide. Backdrop scenery, shadow puppets, live music and dialogue are also part of the Lilliputian experience.

"This was originally a parlor theater form where small groups of people would perform plays of the day, such as Shakespeare or Brecht," says Geiser, who along with Simpson is a puppetry instructor at CalArts. "Later, 20th century artists rediscovered it and began using the technique in their art."

This weekend's presentation marks the second installment of the Frankenstein story that was scripted by playwright Erik Ehn, dean of theater at CalArts. Chapter 1 was staged at the Museum of Jurassic Technology earlier this year.

With two professional actors performing the words, Geiser and Simpson will be moving their puppets on the diminutive stage complete with hand-painted backdrops. The puppets are created with found imagery. For example, the Frankenstein creature's decaying face is based on a Japanese folk mask.

Just as Dr. Frankenstein wanted to bring an inanimate object to life, Geiser and Simpson find that their toy puppets also come alive when the spotlight hits.

"Our puppets don't have reticulated mouths, and only some of their eyes move side to side," explains Geiser. "But audience members tell us they seem alive and have emotions. That's the beauty of good theater — the audience is transported to another place and time through their own imagination."

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'Frankenstein: Mortal Toys'

Where: Velaslavasay Panorama, 1122 W. 24th St., Los Angeles

When: 8 p.m. today and Friday; 4 and 8 p.m. Saturday

Cost: \$10, or \$7 for students. Reservations recommended.

Info: (323) 574-2669