

International Children's Festival a cultural playground

BY ANNA BOROWIECKI
Staff Writer

The International Children's Festival of the Arts is always a big splash of colour, energy, and innovative artistic activities that expand our imagination and our dreams.

This year, expect to see flighty fairies, imperial stilt-walkers, jaw-dropping trapeze artists, and painted rovers costumed in bold, clashing hues. It's that annual time in St. Albert's spring season when the city reverts to silliness, fun, games, and laughter.

Due to the pandemic's unpredictability, the festival was cut short to four days instead of its customary six. It takes place primarily in downtown St. Albert at the Arden Theatre, Millennium Park, and along both banks of the Sturgeon River from June 2 to 5.

Despite its shortened run, it promises not to disappoint. The festival once more gives creativity a free run with a series of live mainstage shows, workshops, site rovers, and an outdoor stage as well as a handful of virtual programs. And it's all designed to ignite the fire of artistic achievement in children and youth.

"Could there be anything better downtown than a beautiful June day in the river valley enjoying laughter, fun, and unique performances? It doesn't get much better than that," said Andrea Gammon, festival co-ordinator.

A completely new event never attempted at the festival is *Koo Koo After Hours*, for the 18-plus crowd, held Saturday, June 4 at Thirsty Rooster Trail Eatery and Bar. While the bar crowd dines and drinks in style, children's duo, Koo Koo Kanga Roo, will entertain adults with Koo Koo Klassics such as *Superheroes Unite* and *Dinosaurs Stomp*.

Bryan Atchison and Neil Olistad are the framework for Koo Koo Kanga Roo. Originally musicians in a traditional rock band, they launched a clean, goofy duo with cheesy dance moves as gimmick. To their surprise it took off, with invitations to schools, folk festivals, and tours of Canada, the United Kingdom, Japan, and Australia.

Koo Koo Kanga Roo's specialty is performing kids' shows, and when organizers asked the duo if they would be willing to attempt a show for the big kids, the answer was an unequivocal "yes."

"Our adult show will be exactly the same as the kids show, except they serve booze," said Atchison. "This is just something for parents and teachers who might need something like the kids. We have fun through clean, quirky music and dance. This is a nod and wink to come out and have a good time."



MARC J CHALIFOUX/Photo
Once again Spandy Andy dons his spandex for a wacky and wild day of dancing at the International Children's Festival running June 2 to 5.

Workshops

Back on the children's front there are many creative zones that cater to different tastes. In addition to five feature shows that blend acrobatics, music, dance, theatre, and clowning, there is a series of nine hands-on workshops.

Thanks to ongoing popular demand, print making, mask making, and drumming are back. For avid nature lovers, 2022 is the Year of the Garden and Musée Heritage Museum is showcasing the importance of gardens through the role of bees and butterflies as pollinators.

The more tech savvy will find Sound Lab a curious discovery as "Doctor" Dave Clarke creates sound-effects for making movies and games come alive.

MARC J CHALIFOUX/Photo
William Mitchell of Big Little Theatre company reprises one of his many roles as a circus master at the International Children's Festival of the Arts.



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"Dave Clarke was involved in the festival before, but not for eight or 10 years. He teaches students to use everyday objects in making sound-effects for video production. It's a wonderful combination of high tech and low tech, resulting in the best sound effects," Gammon said.

Anyone enchanted by storytelling and sitting around a campfire may wish to visit *Théâtre des Petites Âmes' Fires. Stones. Stories*. Participants choose a stone. Through the stone, a once-upon-a-time discovery of images and characters develops.

Although Toddler Town, a quiet place for mothers and young children under the age of five, is not a part of the festival this year, organizers have included *Le Jardin des Petites Âmes/Garden for Little Ones*. It's an interactive sensory garden built for the toddler crowd that introduces puppetry and music.

Also new this year are the Ukrainian Shumka dancers leading *Whirlwind Moves*. It is an opportunity to work with two professional Shumka dancers and learn basic styles, techniques, and a fancy trick or two.

Fizzlewit is back with *Fairy Finding Tour*, a magical treasure hunt in the forest where children solve puzzles and clues to find Flutterby, a lost fairy princess.

"Kids think he's hilarious and so much fun. And we have beautiful woods around here where it's fun to hunt for fairies," Gammon said.

Free stuff

A fraternity of staff and volunteers have worked hard this past year to attract assorted entertainers for its young patrons.

First on the list, the festival puts a spotlight on First Nations and Métis culture through the Indigenous Peoples' Experience and The Healing Garden, Kâkesimokamik, activities and performances on the Sturgeon River's north bank. The drop-in activities feature stories, demonstrations, and traditional crafts.

Indigenous artists have revived their



GLEN FREEMAN/Photo

Amanda "Panda" Syryada returns to the International Children's Festival as both an Outdoor Stage emcee as well as a butterfly princess rover.

culture and help visitors visualize its many facets. Featured on the bill are hoop dancers Hazel and Mark McKennit, artisan Ryan Arcand, playwright-actor Josh Languedoc, fiddler Zachary Willier, dancer-flautist Darnell Brereton, and storyteller Celina Loyer.

Anyone awed by high-in-the-sky spins and twists will enjoy *The Silver Starlets Aerial Acrobatic Show*. Located in Millennium Park, the two aerialists climb a six-metre-high free-standing trapeze rig. The duo twists and tumbles, climbs and falls, while the audience cheers and claps.

TELUS World of Science is back exploring elements of science including rocketry, space, and brain teasers. All the while, it invites children to test their skills using a solar viewer, launching a rocket, and playing with pop bottle rockets.

Walk Walk Dance was created during the pandemic so people could interact with music and sound while remaining socially distanced. *Walk Walk Dance* is a series of lines on a sidewalk that, once stepped on, makes sounds or music similar to a giant xylophone.

"It was developed by a public art institute in Montreal during COVID. Lines were put down on a sidewalk six feet apart and you could walk, wheel, and roll over them. The different sounds would interact with each other and harmonize," Gammon said. "As soon as I saw it, I thought it was absolutely delightful. It looks so joyous and playful for everyone, whether you walk, dance, or roll over it."

The lines are on a 30-metre sidewalk along the north-facing portion of St. Albert Place leading from the Steinhauer sculptures on Red Willow Trail to the

cenotaph. It will be on display until June 30.

Outdoor stage

The TD Outdoor Stage, one of the most popular festival gathering spots, is once again destined for St. Albert Place Plaza. About 20 performers are slated to entertain throughout the four-day event. They range from the solid mastery of the Royal Canadian Artillery Band to the wacky and wild dance moves of Spandy Andy. St. Albert dance artist Paige Tirs taps the beats of jazz with her troupe Rhythm Motives even as Los Rebeldes Musicales teases out hot Latin grooves.

Amanda "Panda" Syryda, who is one of the roving artists on Thursday and Friday, will also emcee the outdoor stage on Saturday and Sunday.

"I'll be introducing each act and doing a few short acts myself featuring hula hooping, juggling, and spinning plates," said Syryda. "On Thursday and Friday, I will be roving, spreading rainbow magic as my butterfly character."

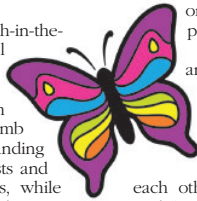
Another roving artist, Elizabeth Hobbs from Pandoric Productions, instead is a walk-around act on stilts. Back for a fifth year, she returns as multiple characters: a bubble fairy, ballerina, and doll character.

"The festival is super fun. I love interacting with kids, playing and giving back. With adults there is not the same sense of interaction. I love it when kids ask questions about fairies or how I got to be so tall or why I can't fly. I take the questions and develop my character according to the questions," said Hobbs.

There are simply too many events to list. However, one thing is for sure. The International Children's Festival of the Arts is a place to recapture childhood with its innocent sense of discovery, play, and laughter.

Parking is limited. Free park-and-ride shuttle buses are available every 20 minutes at the St. Albert Centre bus exchange to and from the festival site from 8:20 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. All festival information is available at www.stalbert.ca.

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MARC J CHALIFOUX/Photo

Anyone who needs to burn off extra energy can take a run through a colourful maze at the International Children's Festival of the Arts.



NICOLE MAGO/Photo

Koo Koo Ranga Roo put on their dancing shoes to entertain the entire family at the International Children's Festival.



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