

Holiday Planning

It's the time of year when people ask me which holiday production they should see. I usually throw that back to them, asking what they're looking for.

If it's traditional holiday entertainment, there's nothing better than the Cincinnati Playhouse's **A Christmas Carol**, a production I've seen annually for 18 years. Every year it's beautifully produced with a cast of local professional actors plus some great kids, making it feel like a warm family telling a familiar story.

If it's kids you're thinking about, you can't go wrong with the fairytale musicals that Ensemble Theatre presents. These shows, created by playwright Joe McDonough and composer David Kisor, are fun for the younger set, usually with a subtle message about self-esteem and caring, but they're also entertaining for adults. This year's iteration, **Sleeping Beauty**, is reviewed in this issue (page 34).



PHOTO: SANDY UNDERWOOD

Deb Girdler in ETC's *Sleeping Beauty*

If you tend to be cynical about the holidays, you'll enjoy David Sedaris's **Santaland Diaries** at New Edgecliff Theatre or **Every Christmas Story Ever Told**, produced by Cincinnati Shakespeare Company in the courtyard at Arnold's Bar & Grill. Other options include **Nun crackers**, the holiday incarnation of *Nunsense*, at Northern Kentucky University's Commonwealth Dinner Theatre, and two movie-inspired shows, Covedale Center's **Miracle on 34th Street** and Falcon Theater's "live radio drama" version of **It's a Wonderful Life**.

Several theaters offer family-friendly shows that aren't holiday themed. Cincinnati Shakespeare has assembled a funny 1930s Hollywood-themed version of **The Taming of the Shrew**, and Covington's Carnegie Center is offering the musical **Oliver**. Jersey Productions is presenting **Once Upon a Mattress**, a clever musical comedy inspired by the fairytale of the princess and the pea. Also available is a show getting its local premiere, **Sideways Stories from Wayside School** at Know Theatre. (See my review on page 34)

If you'd prefer to stay home with a good book about theater (or want to give one to someone), look for the just-published annual volume of **Best Plays Theater Yearbook**, this one covering 2007-08. It offers essays about several shows we've already seen locally (*The Seafarer* at ETC and *Eurydice* at Know Theatre) and an insightful piece about *Adding Machine*, a new musical that Know will present in February. The volume also includes an overview of the Broadway and off-Broadway seasons, plus an extensive compendium of facts, figures and historical data about theater in New York and around the country.

If you want a fascinating read about the context of Shakespeare's life and plays, I really like Stephen Greenblatt's **Will in the World: How Shakespeare Became Shakespeare**. Rather than examining the plays, this fluidly written book from 2004 examines the sociological and historical context of Elizabethan England in ways that provide new insights into the playwright and his plays.

Finally, the best holiday gift you can offer, in my opinion, is tickets to one of our fine local theaters. Better yet, get four and take your friends or some children. It will be a memorable experience for everyone, it'll help the local arts and you'll have a great time.

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PHOTO COURTESY JIMMY KUEHNLE

Jimmy Kuehnle's inflatable suit, which he calls You Wear What I Wear, will appear in Over-the-Rhine Friday.

Adjusted for Inflation

Performance artist Jimmy Kuehnle and his mobile, inflatable art invade Cincinnati

► INTERVIEW BY STEVEN ROSEN

The cast of colorful and eccentric characters populating downtown and Over-the-Rhine will inflate by one this Friday when performance artist Jimmy Kuehnle comes to town.

At first, he'll look pretty normal just before his performance starts at noon Friday near Washington Park. But within seconds, without warning, he'll transform into ... well, it's hard to describe, actually. He'll be concealed within an inflatable, 9-foot-tall, purple-banded pink cube with swaying hammer-like appendages coming on all sides. And then he — or should we say *it?* — will begin walking all

over town. Weather permitting, that is: He can't do this in high winds.

What exactly is he supposed to be? In three separate cities, strangely, this costume been taken by people as a visualization of the H1N1 virus.

"I don't know how to describe it except saying people think it looks like a virus," Kuehnle says by telephone from Chicago after completing a performance in Millennium Park.

Actually, the inflatable suit has a formal name — You Wear What I Wear. He has a good many other suits that he uses at other performances, with names like Walking Fish, Big Red, Kiss the Sky and Big Blob. (If he has time in Cincinnati, he may change into Big Red partway through his performance.) You Wear What I Wear has the advantage of having enough circulating air to keep him upright and balanced on mildly windy days.

The large suit is made of lightweight nylon and has two battery-powered fans inside it to continually blow and circulate air. The batteries are the heaviest aspect of the suit, weighing about 15 pounds. (He likes nylon because it's soft in case people bump into him, though he has experimented with other materials.) He designed and sewed You Wear What I Wear at his studio in Albion, Mich., where he is artist-in-residence at Albion

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College.

"When I start a performance, I'll have my backpack that has my batteries and duffel bag," he says. "I'll set it down and within five minutes I can be in my inflated suit. That's the whole idea — you were a person walking down the street one minute, and now people see that you're this strange creature. The whole point is to intervene in people's everyday lives and have them have a consciousness shift. You want to bring an absurd sensibility, so their mind becomes vulnerable to new patterns of thought."

He does not have a designated route or a set performance space.

"I just walk down the sidewalk and go where people are," he explains, noting that his feet are free to move. "People do follow me, and I like that. But there's no long-term commitment. People can get what they want from it in five seconds and then go away, or they can follow me for as long as they want."

He is able to see through eye-level openings, but only in front of him. "I definitely can't see behind me, so I spin a lot. It allows me to keep pace with my surroundings. It's like the entire sculpture spins."

By now, Kuehnle says, he's gotten pretty good at negotiating his terrain.

"I can get caught on fences and signs and I'm always scared a truck will clip a piece of fabric," he explains. "But I've been doing this enough I know where I can fit and how to get around different types of urban obstacles."

Kuehnle, 30, had a knack for building things as a kid in St. Louis. That began to blossom when he was an undergraduate at Truman State University in Missouri. Later, he taught

English in Japan before seeking a Master of Fine Arts degree from University of Texas at San Antonio.

"I started making bicycles, sculptures and public pieces and really enjoyed that," Kuehnle says. "And after grad school, I got a Fulbright (scholarship) to go back to Japan. I couldn't bring all this heavy steel stuff with me, but I still wanted to be out in public. So inflatables were the answer."

He is not, it should be noted, the only artist working with inflatables as a medium. He mentions Paul McCarthy, a California-based conceptualist known for the provocative nature of his pieces and performances; balloon artist Jason Hackenworth of Grand Rapids and Kurt Penschke's RedBall project, in which inflatable red balls are set up in cities around the world. It hasn't yet gotten to the point, however, where two inflatable artists bump into each other in the same town.

Kuehnle is traveling with his wife, artist Mimi Kato, on this trip. The two of them tend to live where they have residencies (in New Mexico before Albion). Last summer, he performed in Finland. Next year he'll be in Italy. Making connections is a beneficial byproduct of doing free performances like the one here on Friday.

At Albion College, the school wants him to show students how he sews his costumes and his bosses allow him to be free to do his work. The thinking is that it will inspire his students.

"It's to show them how they can be their own gatekeeper," says Kuehnle, a role model for would-be inflatable-suit wearers everywhere. ©

ART SCHLICHTER — Former Ohio State University football star quarterback will discuss his book, *Busted: The Rise and Fall of Art Schlichter*. 7-8 p.m. Dec. 15. Books & Co. at The Greene, 4453 Walnut St., Beavercreek, 937-429-2169.

► **ONSTAGE**

CLASSICAL MUSIC

CEREMONY OF CAROLS — The sopranos and altos of the cathedral choir sing Benjamin Britten's "Ceremony of Carols." \$5 for lunch. 12:10 Dec. 15. Christ Church Cathedral, 318 E. Fourth St., Downtown, 513-621-1817.

HAMILTON FAIRFIELD SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA — The symphony performs "Gloria" by Francis Poulenc Constance Baesel as well as other Holiday favorites with a sing-a-long and Santa too! \$10. 7:30 p.m. Dec. 12. New Life Vineyard Church, 2470 Princeton Road, Fairfield, 513-737-9700.

HAPPY HOLIDAYS WITH THE POPS — Join the Pops and special guests, the African Children's Choir, for carols, holiday tunes and seasonal songs. \$20-\$98. 8 p.m. Dec. 11; 3 and 8 p.m. Dec. 12; 3 p.m. Dec. 13. Music Hall, 1241 Elm St., Over-the-Rhine, 513-744-3344.

VOCAL ARTS ENSEMBLE — VAE's holiday tradition continues with music inspired by the nativity including John Tavener's "Mother and Child" and #151, a work that evolves from quiet introspection to thunderous celebration with full organ and Hindu Temple gong and #151, and Rautavaara's mystical "Canticum Mariae Virginis." \$20. 5 p.m. Dec. 13. St. Boniface Church, 1750 Chase Ave., Northgate, 513-421-5354.

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COMEDY

LYNNE KOPLITZ — Lynne Koplitz is a regular at Stand-Up New York, Comic Strip Live and Gotham Comedy Club. \$14-\$16. 8 p.m. Thursday; 8 and 10:15 p.m. Friday; 7:30 and 10 p.m. Saturday; 7:30 p.m. Sunday. Funny Bone on the Levee, One Levee Way, Suite 3124 Newport, 859-957-2000.

★ **ROBERT HAWKINS** — Wrote and starred in the sitcom *Titus*. \$8-\$12. 8 p.m. Thursday-Sunday; 10:30 p.m. Friday and Saturday. Go Bananas Comedy Club, 8410 Market Place Lane, Blue Ash, 513-984-9288.

DANCE

THE NUTCRACKER JAZZED UP! — de la dance company presents *The Nutcracker* with a Jazz twist. \$18; \$12 student/senior. 8 p.m. Dec. 11; 2 and 8 p.m. Dec. 12; 2 p.m. Dec. 13. Fairfield Community Arts Center, 411 Wessel Drive, Fairfield, 513-867-5348.

MIXED MEDIA

EIGHT DAYS A WEEK — Eight Days a Week recreates The Beatles sound, truly capturing the excitement, high energy and feeling that the Fab Four created, costumes included. 7 p.m. Dec. 11. Boone County Public Library, 1786 Burlington Pike, Burlington, 859-432-2665.

HOLIDAY HOOPLA — Full of sketch comedy that pokes fun at our desire to make the holidays perfect, rockin' seasonal tunes from house band BillWho?, and the hilarious musical send-up "The Santa Babies," Hoopla gives your jingle bells a reason to rock. \$20-\$30. 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays and Thursdays; 7:30 and 10:30 p.m. Friday; 7 p.m. Sunday. Shadowbox Cabaret, One Levee Way, Newport, 859-957-7625.

THE LUNCHBOX — Designed to showcase Shadowbox's up-and-comers and get them ready for the Shadowbox evening productions, The Lunchbox features past-hit sketches and live Rock from the ensemble's 12-year history. \$10; \$5 students/seniors. Noon Fridays. Shadowbox Cabaret, 1 Levee Way, Newport, 859-957-7625.

THEATER

★ **A CHRISTMAS CAROL** — Adapted by Howard Dallin, the Playhouse's version of *A Christmas Carol* combines faithful storytelling with spellbinding stage magic to bring to life its familiar story of a sinner given one last chance at redemption by four persuasive ghosts. \$20-\$67. 7 p.m. Tuesday-Friday; 2 and 7 p.m. Saturday-Sunday and 7 p.m. selected Mondays. No shows Dec. 24-25. Through Dec. 30. Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park, 962 Mt. Adams Circle, Mount Adams, 513-421-3888.

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"A show everyone will love...beautiful and thought-provoking."

—*The New York Times*

DRAWN BY NEW YORK

Watercolors and Drawings from the New-York Historical Society



Victor Semon Péraud, *The Flatiron Building, Fifth Avenue and Madison Square, New York City, 1907*, black ink, black crayon, and gouache on paper, mounted on card. Gift of Victor Semon Péraud, New-York Historical Society

Through January 17, 2010

The exhibition at the New-York Historical Society and the publication of the catalogue and its research were generously supported by The Getty Foundation, Leonard L. and Ellen Milberg, Barbara and Richard Debs, Pam and Scott Schafner, Eli Wilner & Company, Inc., The Samuel H. Kress Foundation, Furthermore: a program of the J.M. Kaplan Fund, Alexander Acevedo, and Graham Arader.

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