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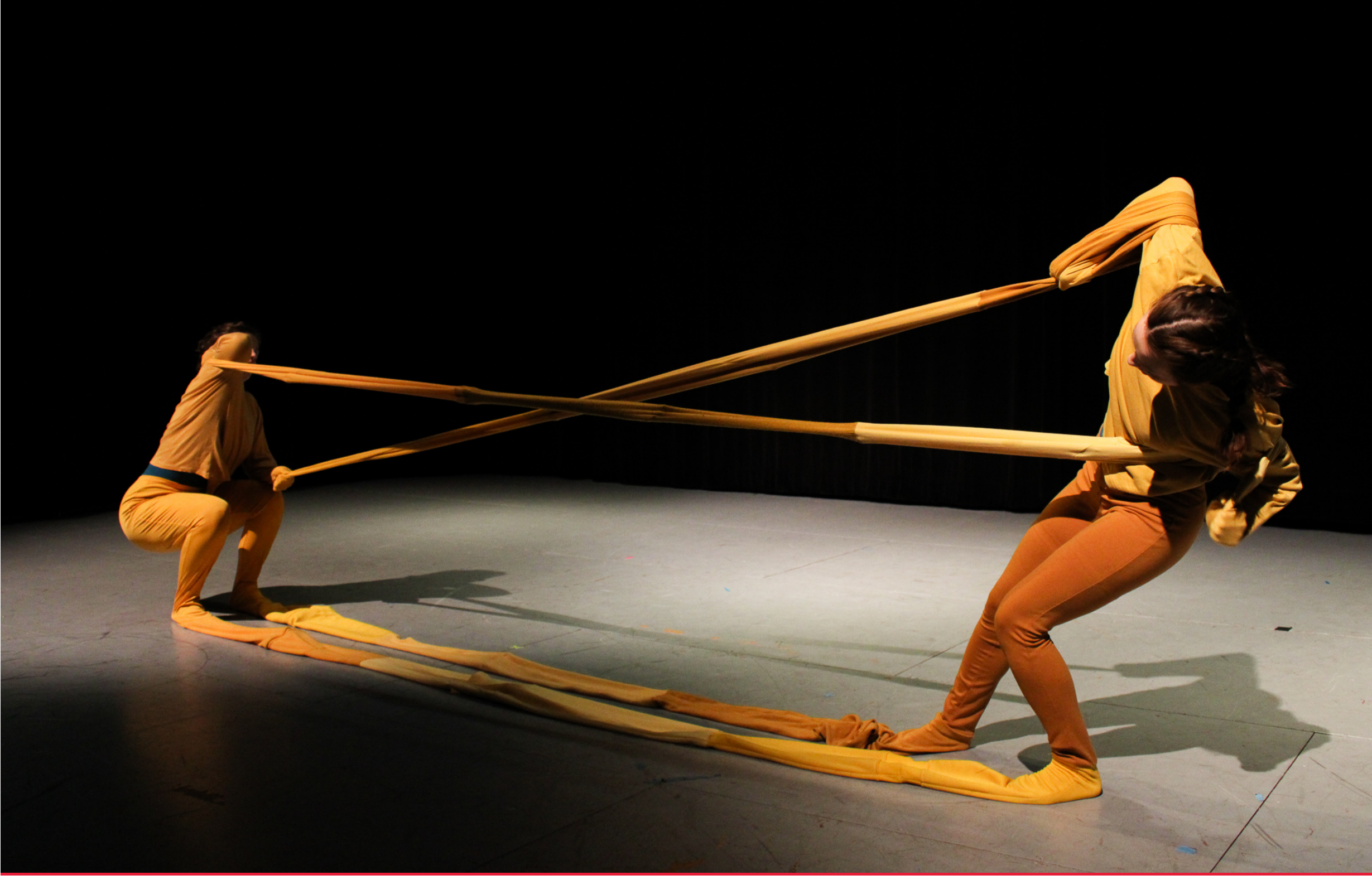
Jim Henson awards showcase brings student puppeteers to the main stage

Freelance Reporter · 2 days ago

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Students perform "STUMBLE MERGE," a puppetry-focused original one-act, on March 30, 2023. This project was exhibited during the 2023 Henson Awards Showcase, a collection of performances hosted by the theatre, dance and performance studies school at the University of Maryland, that present student projects funded by the Jim Henson Fund for Puppetry. (Giuseppe LoPiccolo/The Diamondback)

By Chris Barylick
For The Diamondback

It was a surreal series of performances at the Cafritz Foundation Theater in The Clarice Smith Performing Arts Center for the Henson Awards Showcase 2023 Thursday night. In a packed house, five award recipients presented their puppetry pieces and explained the meaning behind them.

The showcase, which was inspired by University of Maryland alum and Muppets creator Jim Henson and collaborator Jane Henson, awards recipients get \$1,500 to write, build and perform a piece.

This year’s selections went to Mary Kathryn Ford, a graduate dance major, Charlotte Rachel Richardson-Deppe, a graduate studio art major, Leo Grierson, a graduate theatre design major, Daniel Miramontes, a graduate dance major and Miele Murray, a freshman theatre major.

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“I’m really glad we got this award,” Richardson-Deppe said. “It’s been wonderful to be supported. I think as someone who moves between performance and art, this is like a perfect joining of performance and art where I can totally bring soft sculpture and MK [Mary Kathryn Ford] can bring all their dance background. And we can jam.”

The show began with master puppeteer Dr. I Nyoman Sedana, who presented an Indonesian folk story about emptiness and creation.

Sedana, who opened the performance by singing and using his hands as puppets, eventually brought out a series of intricately designed puppets. He then interacted with the crowd, handing them puppets and having them make noises as part of the story.

Ford and Richardson-Deppe performed their piece, “STUMBLE MERGE,” the two beginning intertwined in a giant yellow shirt and pants with interconnected sleeves and legs, using their weight in a way that blurred the idea of whose limbs were whose.

“I’m influenced a lot by my past in the circus, and by thinking about how bodies interact with each other,” Richardson-Deppe said before the showcase.

She was pointed to a large puppet made entirely of stuffed, interconnected pants and leggings that would house her showcase partner, Ford, during one of their segments.

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The showcase moved on to Grierson’s “Playing Wolves,” which combined more traditional wolf puppets with comparisons about self-identity, external perception and fitting into a pack or community while also exploring gender identity.

The story was told a first time, and then moved into digital puppetry. Their digital wolf avatars, which had been created with Unity software, appeared as puppets on a projection screen behind them, where they recreated the story in a new format.

Miramontes’ “Drops of Gold” segment began with Miramontes entering with dancers carrying mylar sheets they laid down on the floor and carefully unwrapped, gold side up. They began to lift the interconnected mylar sheets, hanging them off their arms like puppets and bouncing them.

As the performance progressed, the movements became pronounced, the crinkling began to sound like the ocean as Miramontes and the dancers finally laid down on the blankets to complete the performance.

“I was looking at videos on Jim Henson, and in one of the videos that I found, something that really stuck out to me was he said that anything can be a puppet,” Miramontes said.

When asked if he was nervous about the showcase, Miramontes said, “It’s an idea that you’re proposing. And I guess it comes from like a personal place of, ‘I really am interested in exploring this.’”

Murray’s “Here to Wed Socabane” piece concluded the showcase. Murray told the tale of royal puppet intrigue within the kingdom of Evolor and discussed whether portraits and love letters reveal an entire character, especially with marriage at stake.

“I paid a lot of attention to facial structure and to their physical appearances in this show, not only because it’s important to the plot, like for my story, but also because I wanted to create a different world,” Murray said. “I kind of had to find a nice in between of humble materials but also a unique design.”

She combined puppetry, singing and dancing within her work.

Murray also recalled overcoming obstacles in building her puppets and how some of their parts had to be swapped out in a pinch.

“I definitely had to take one of their jaws off. It sounds very, very brutal, but it had to happen. I think that was the most grotesque thing I had to do,” she said.

Members of the university community came out to watch the performance.

“It’s intriguing that stuff I work with in computer science and immersive media was found here in the fine arts department where I didn’t know they were using any of this stuff,” Stevens Miller, a lecturer in the computer science and immersive media design departments, said. “I thought the limits of puppetry were broader than I expected they might be.”

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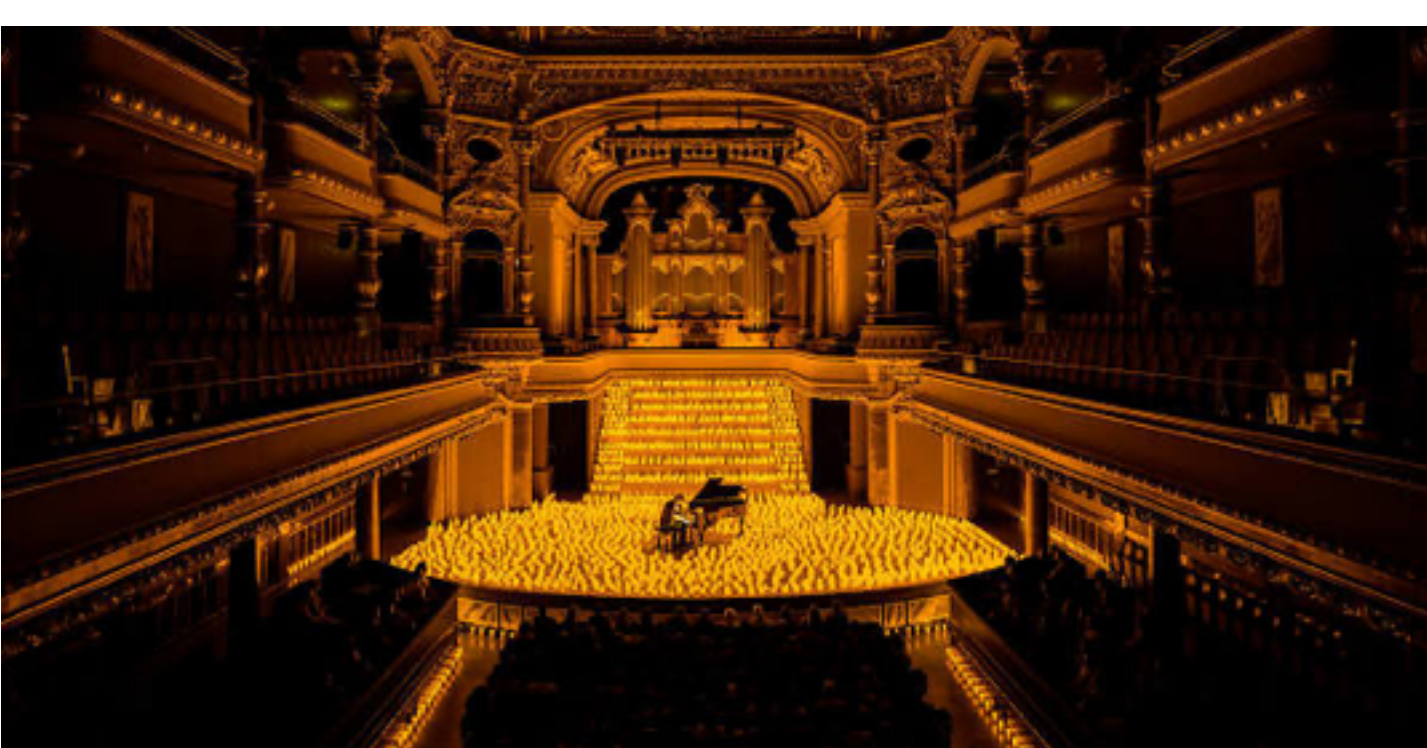
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