HARVARD SQUARED

inhibiting.” Puppets, Myhrum asserts, “can say and do things that human actors [and audiences] wouldn’t dare. That’s what makes them so powerful.”

And not just for kids. Although caregivers can and do enjoy shows with simple themes, the theater’s “Puppets at Night” events, like Bend, are strictly for adults. The bimonthly Puppet Slams (the next falls on January 16) offer a wide range of acts, including a bloody trip to the dentist. The theater began the slams in 1996; the movement has since expanded across the country and is financially supported by the Puppet Slam Network, founded by Heather Henson, daughter of the Muppets’ creators Jim and Jane Henson.

The Muppet Show and Sesame Street were a popular catalyst for the development of American puppetry in recent decades. But the art of animating inanimate objects has ancient origins across the globe, and at one time was restricted to a culture’s healers and religious figures. “There is always something profoundly sacred about the puppet, dwelling as it does on that indefinite border between life and its absence,” curator Leslee Asch, a former executive director of the Jim Henson Foundation and now head of the Silvermine Arts Center in Connecticut, wrote for the Katonah Museum’s 2010 exhibit, The Art of Contemporary Puppet Theater. “Puppetry serves as an extraordinarily powerful means of giving form to the internal or invisible.”

The willing suspension of disbelief, Asch continued, allows the audience to engage and accept that the created actors are “real.” Puppetry is so often relegated to children’s entertainment, she laments, because “sadly, in our society only children have been allowed to maintain the capacity for wonder, awe, and fantasy.”

Myhrum agrees. Puppetry’s “magic” is seducing an audience into identifying with characters composed of papier mâché, cardboard, cloth, plastic, wood, or clay. In 2014 the theater premiered the adult show Reverse Cascade, by Anna Fitzgerald, a wordless story about circus performer Judy Finelli’s struggle with multiple sclerosis. Several black-clad, nearly invisible puppeteers create “Finelli,” the only character in the play, by tying together four silk scarves (the type jugglers use). The audience sees “her” miraculous circus tricks, the scarves moving in graceful arcs and dance steps, before her lithe body starts to fail—terribly. Cello music plays, the artist flails and flops, trying to gain control of her body, which is fragile because it’s composed of scarves. Through a slow and painful process she manages to pull herself up to balance on aerial circus rings, but soon those rings become the wheels of her wheelchair. “The audience sees that this woman has knots in her leg because she has knots in her leg—the abstraction becomes real,” Myhrum notes. “A puppet is a visual metaphor for a human struggle that takes place on this little tabletop stage.”

ALL IN A DAY: The Arboretum’s Winterland

Winter is the best time to get out and see New England’s trees in all their naked glory. The Arnold Arboretum, open year-round, offers just such forays with “Fall Into Health” (November 21), a brisk walk along lesser-known paths, and a “Winter Wellness Walk” (December 13), when the landscape is, perhaps, at its boniest. Those preferring an unguided jaunt followed by a stint inside to view nature on paper and canvas might enjoy Drawing Trees, Painting the Landscape: Frank M. Rines (1892-1962), on display through February 14. Lectures and classes are also on tap. Writer, designer, and historian Kathryn Aalto reveals the magic, at least in the mind of A.A. Milne, of England’s Ashdown Forest in “The Natural World of Winnie-the-Pooh: The Forest That Inspired the Hundred Acre Wood” (the topic of her new book) on November 15. And on December 8, MIT physics professor Frank Wilczek explores “A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature’s Deep Design.” Check the arboretum’s website for full details.

The Arnold Arboretum
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