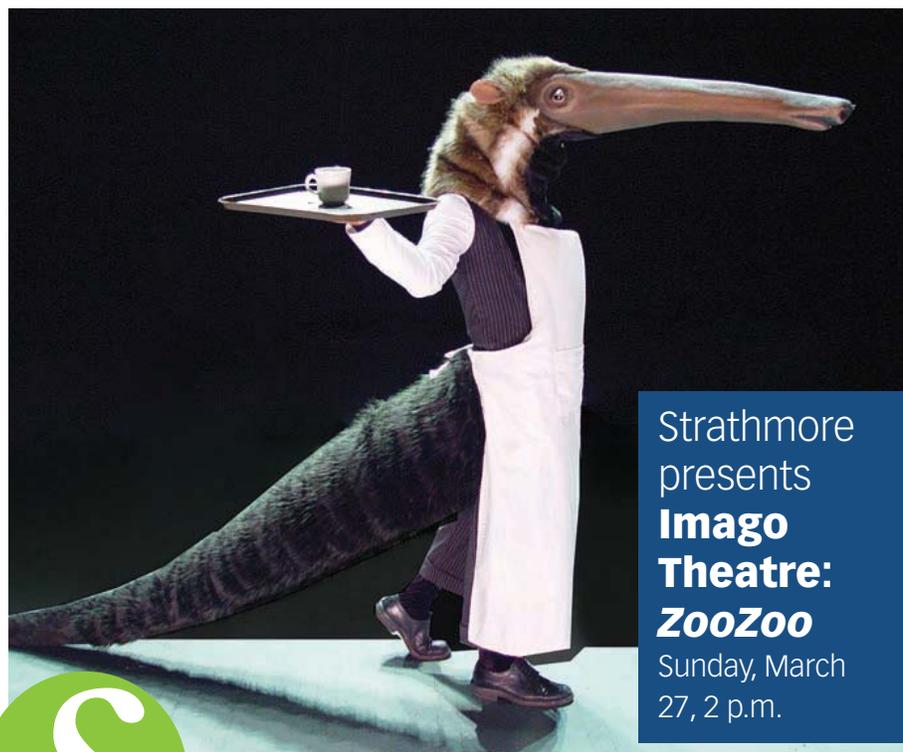




Zoo Who?

Imago Theatre's mad-cap menagerie

By Chris Slattery



Strathmore
presents
**Imago
Theatre:
ZooZoo**
Sunday, March
27, 2 p.m.



Some art forms defy description, and *ZooZoo*, the latest presentation from Imago Theatre, is one of them. As family-friendly as it is clever and edgy, this is a show that entertains in the grand tradition of Cirque du Soleil and the Peking Acrobats.

"It's kind of its own thing," says director Jerry Mouawad, who founded Imago in 1979 with *ZooZoo* co-creator Carol Triffle. "It's almost impossible to explain, like describing what film is to someone who has never seen it; or music to someone who has never heard it."

Forget about reindeer games: *Zoo-*

Zoo shows the games penguins play, and polar bears, too. Rabbits get rowdy, hippos hunger for a good night's sleep, and anteaters mind their manners when they come out to dine—all while the audience watches in wonder.

Mouawad says the kid-captivating, creature-centric, music-and-movement driven show—a follow-up to Imago's smash hit *Frogz*—is "a combination of a zoo and a circus, with some silent theater, set to an original score by Katie Griesar." The 11 vignettes in the show, he adds, are tales of humanity from the perspective of the animals in Imago's unique, playful masked menagerie, told in thought-provoking and sometimes hilarious ways.

"There are hippos, penguins, anteaters; frogs with an inferiority complex," says Mouawad. "Sometimes we bring in inanimate objects, like a paper bag."

Nothing stays inanimate for long, though. *ZooZoo* features a cast of agile performers in exquisitely fabricated costumes, moving through five- to eight-minute mini-shows that incorporate light, sound, movement and audience interaction.

TimeOut New York says, "The effect is mesmerizing," while *The Oregonian's* Douglas Perry calls it "a hybrid of sorts ... a loosely structured collection of vignettes using masks, costumes, puppets and the like to create visual wonderment and moments of comic possibility."

"When you see something done without technology it's fascinating," says Mouawad. "There's a lot of silence and space in the show, moments of stillness between moments of activity."

ZooZoo is at once original and referential, rooted in the traditional mask theater of ancient cultures around the world, inspired by the work of Jacques LeCoq and infused with a modern cultural sensibility.

Take "Larvabatic," which Mouawad likens to an M.C. Escher painting: "You see it one way; you see it another," he says. "You know it's an illusion, but your mind keeps moving back and forth." Or consider "Penguins," which he says was written under the influence of the comedian Jack Benny.

"Masks and puppets are magical in the sense that they come to life. They 'change' and yet we know they are fixed," he says.

And the magic drives the direction of the show itself, because at Imago Theatre the masks—the creatures—are created first, then brought into rehearsal so that the stories can grow up around them.

"Sometimes it takes a month or two; sometimes it takes a year," Mouawad says. "We try to define what is universal, what will reflect the human condition." ☺