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Miami Book Fair to stage special spectacles for children

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Actresses Cristina Ferrari, 27, and Danly Arango, 45, practice for their roles in the non-verbal children's performance, 'Light as Water.' The play was adapted from Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story, Light is Like Water.
MATIAS J. OCNER / MIAMI HERALD STAFF

To make the Miami Book Fair International possible, hundreds of fair organizers and volunteers work year-round researching and selecting authors, programming performances, building sets and stages and organizing rehearsals. They work out every single detail for the eight day-long festival – parking, shutting down streets, delivering books for author signings, setting up media rooms and making sure there is enough food, water, tables, chairs and toilet paper.

The children's stages are a special spectacle, with performances from aerial acrobats and break dancers, to presentations by authors and international storytellers, to hands-on art projects and mad scientist experiments.

Melissa Messulam, a program coordinator for the book fair, spends a great deal of time researching authors and performers and coordinating the logistics of the children's stages. She manages the main performance venues – Happily Ever After, the storytelling stage; Once Upon a

Time, the outdoor performance stage; and Play Time International Children's Theatre Festival, which features theater companies from Italy, Chile, Argentina, Colombia and Miami that introduce children to different theater forms and cultural traditions.

"I hope to inspire the next generation of culture makers, artists and participants," she said. "And I hope they all leave with a new book."

There won't be a dull moment on the children's stages. Here's a look at some of what there is for kids to see and do at this year's book fair.

Mr. Wembly Wordsmith's Storytorium children's stage

He's an explorer and a collector of literary artifacts. He tells riddles and tall tales and has a large vocabulary. Other than that, Mr. Wembly Wordsmith doesn't have much of a story. But kids can create one for him.

He can be a mountain climber by day and a pirate by night. He can make spaceships and planet-hop with his friends. He can build enormous bridges that connect all the continents to one another. He can do anything kids want him to do. It's their story to tell.

Kids can solve the mystery of Mr. Wembly Wordsmith with their stories and share them on the book fair's social media pages. And if they bring their stories to the Storytorium stage, they may be read out loud.

The Storytorium stage is a place to hear and tell stories. The stage features several authors and children's book readings.

Nicole Swift, a program coordinator for the book fair, worked on the Storytorium stage. She and Lissette Mendez, the book fair programs director, got the inspiration for the stage and its namesake character from *The Fantastic Flying Books of Mr. Morris Lessmore* by William Joyce. They started making up names that had a similar sound and feel as Mr. Morris Lessmore and thought about what the character would look like — a steampunk with a story-making machine.

She hopes kids will actively participate in the stage and leave with a renewed love of stories.

"I want them to know how stories can open up the world for them. How books can be their solace, comfort, best friend, time machine," Swift said. "I want them to fall in love with the act of reading and I want them to see that there are many stories in the world and that authors, creators, are

people just like them.”

First Day of School: Do You Want to Be My Friend? by Jennifer Bisram

Jennifer Bisram was worried about her younger sister Cheryl’s first day of kindergarten. She hoped she would make friends and feel comfortable in class.

When Cheryl came home from school, she told her family that she went up to every student in her class, shook their hand and asked them all to be her friend.

Both sisters are grown now, but they’ll never forget that story.

“It’s funny,” Jennifer said. “It’s something we tease her about until this day. It’s a long-running joke in our family.”

Cheryl’s first day of school inspired Jennifer’s first illustrated children’s book, *First Day of School: Do You Want to Be My Friend?* It’s Star’s first day of school, and everywhere she goes, from the bus stop to the lunchroom, she meets new friends who come from all over the world and learns tidbits about each of their cultures.

Jennifer, a television reporter for an ABC affiliate station in Detroit, said her job has taught her the importance of being friendly and making connections. She has also met people from a variety of backgrounds. As a reporter, she said she gets to reach thousands of adults a day, but she wanted a way to reach children. She wanted to write a book about the first day of school and diversity.

“This book marries all those things – friendship, diversity, anxiety and newness,” she said.

Jennifer Bisram will present her book at the book fair at 11 a.m. Sunday, Nov. 23.

Once Upon a Time children’s stage

The Once Upon a Time children’s stage is an outdoor stage full of performances varying from break dancing to aerial circus to improv comedy. This stage is made up of adult and young performers.

“It is important to be able to provide your performers with the ability to practice their craft, and at such an iconic event as the Miami Book Fair,” program coordinator Messulam said. “Perhaps even more significant, I think, is the opportunity to have a child see another child up on a stage and realize that they, too, can achieve their goals.”

Delou Africa

Drums sounded and feet pounded the black rubberized floor of a dance room in the Little Haiti Cultural Center. Delou Africa a nonprofit organization and West African performing arts company, was practicing for its upcoming community performances — including a book fair appearance.

Delou Africa branched from the Delou Africa Dance Ensemble, which was founded in 1987. Delou is a word in Wolof, a language spoken in Senegal, the Gambia and Mauritania, that means “back” or “return to.”

“In creating Delou Africa, I decided the goal was to bridge cultural gaps,” said Njeri Plato, the nonprofit’s founder and director. “We want to instill an understanding of African culture through the arts and education.”

Delou Africa perpetuates West African customs by teaching adults and children traditional West African dance, drum and music.

Eric Gore has been playing the drums since he was 5 years old. He was born in Guezanufla, a small village in the Ivory Coast, and was recruited by a drumming company in a large city. He has spent the last 20 years traveling the world playing the African djembe, a goblet-shaped hand drum and has been playing the drums with Delou Africa since 2001.

“The drums inspire me,” he said. “They’re what makes me happy.”

Shedia Nelson, artistic director for Urgent, a nonprofit youth and community development organization, has been a dancer for 20 years and has danced with Delou Africa for five.

“I dance like the drums are in my feet,” she said.

One of the Delou drummers spotted Nelson dancing with another company, Venus Rising, and invited her to join Delou.

Nelson is excited to perform at the book fair for the first time and hopes the young people who see their performance will appreciate the music and dance.

The organization hopes to engage kids to play with the drums with blue paint buckets donated from Lowe’s.

"I hope it'll inspire young people to embrace music, as that is the universal language that unites us all," Nelson said.

Delou Africa will perform at the book fair at 5 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 22, and at 4:15 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 23.

Play Time! International Children's Theatre Festival

Play Time features seven performances by local and international theater companies. Performances are held at Teatro Prometeo in the Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus, the Little Haiti Cultural Center and the Koubek Center.

"Doing an international theater festival is important because it makes us all global citizens," said Joann María Yarrow, artistic director of Teatro Prometeo and co-director of *Light as Water*, one of the film festival productions.

Light as Water by Teatro Prometeo repertory ensemble

In Gabriel Garcia Marquez's short story *Light is Like Water*, two boys leave their home in Cartagena, Colombia and move to Madrid with their parents. The boys beg their parents for a rowboat, which had been promised to them for their perfect grades. Their father finally gives in and buys the rowboat, but the boys have to figure out how to get it up to their cramped apartment on the fifth floor of 47 Castellana Rd.

On a Wednesday night when the boys' parents are at the movies, they invite friends over to the apartment. The brothers break the lightbulb of one of the living room lamps, and from the bulb flows a stream of yellow light that turns into water, lifts the rowboat and takes the boys on an ocean adventure.

"We want to inject kids with imagination," Yarrow said.

The actors of the Teatro Prometeo repertory ensemble's adapted the short story to take audience members through the brothers' childhood memories and rowboat escapades.

"Using their imagination and the objects around them, the boys transform their bedroom into a pirate's island, an undersea adventure and a raft voyage in the middle of the sea," said Jim Hammond, a puppet master and co-director of the performance. Hammond toured with *The Lion*

King for six years as its puppet master and recently put together the Day of the Dead Celebration in Fort Lauderdale, complete with a 17-foot-tall Frida Kahlo skeleton puppet. He co-directs the play with Yarrow.

The performance, *Light as Water*, is nonverbal and features shadow and wooden Bunraku puppets, a Japanese style of puppetry that uses a handle extending from the back of the puppet's neck to control the head movements.

"The performance is nonverbal so that there's no language barrier for children to understand and perceive the totality of the show," said Neher Jacqueline Briceño, director of the international children's theatre festival.

Light as Water will be performed at Teatro Prometeo in Building 1 of the Miami Dade College Wolfson Campus at 10 a.m. Thursday, Nov. 20; 1:15 p.m. Saturday, Nov. 22; and 11:30 a.m. Sunday, Nov. 23. All the international children's theatre performances are free.

To share book fair stories, look for @MiamiBookFair on Twitter (<https://twitter.com/miamibookfair>) and Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/MiamiBookFair>).

MORE BOOK FAIR FUN

Mr. Wembly Wordsmith's Storytorium children's stage

Presentation of *Some Bugs* by Angela DiTerlizzi. Grab a magnifying glass and explore a buggy back yard full of butterflies, bumblebees and beetles. Friday, Nov. 21 at 10 a.m.

Presentation of *If I Had a Raptor* by George O'Connor. A little girl can't think of a better pet to snuggle and play with than a baby raptor. But what happens when the little dinosaur grows up? Saturday, Nov. 22, at 12:30 p.m.

Once Upon a Time children's stage

Break dance and beat box with Miami's b-boy dance crew Flipside Kings. Friday, Nov 21 at 11:30 a.m.; Saturday, Nov. 22 at 1:15 p.m.; Sunday, Nov. 23 at 2 p.m.:

Kids can show their smarts and win cool prizes with Brain Quest. Sunday, Nov. 23 at 11 a.m.

Happily Ever After children's stage

Cuenteros shares stories from Latin America. Saturday, Nov. 22 at 11 a.m. and Sunday, Nov. 23 at 5 p.m.

Join Keith Wann for American Sign Language storytelling. Friday, Nov. 21 at 12:15 p.m.; Saturday, Nov. 22 at 2:45 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 23 at 3:30 p.m.

Kuniko Yamamoto brings stories all the way from Japan. Friday, Nov. 21 at 1 p.m.; Saturday, Nov. 22 at 1:15 p.m. and Sunday, Nov. 23 at 12:30 p.m.

Play Time! International Children's Theatre

***Abbracci (Hugs)* by Teatro Telaio theatre company in Brescia, Italy**

Two pandas like each other but don't know how to express it. They go to the school of hugs to learn. It's a story about the importance of expressing feelings.

Schedule: Saturday, Nov. 22 at 11:30 a.m. and Sunday, Nov. 23 at 3 p.m. at Teatro Prometeo

***Gotas (Droplets)* by Adriana Barraza Black Box theatre company in Miami**

Four clowns teach the importance of preserving our water through song and dance.

Schedule: Wednesday Nov. 19 at 11:45 a.m. in the Little Haiti Cultural Center. Thursday, Nov. 20 at 11:45 a.m. in the Koubek Center. Saturday, Nov. 22 at 3 p.m. in Teatro Prometeo.