

THE ASHEVILLE PUPPETRY ALLIANCE

THE BIG DIPPER: CALENDAR, COMPASS, & CLOCK

What is the most easily recognizable star pattern in the sky? The Big Dipper, of course. Asheville's acclaimed puppetry group, Red Herring Puppets, has created a new show that follows the Big Dipper through eons of scientific and mythological wisdom. With stories from the ancient Chinese, Greek, Micmac, and Southern slaves, "The Big Dipper: Calendar, Compass, & Clock" explores how the stars have been used to keep track of the seasons, to tell time, and to guide our way at night.

Scientifically speaking, the Big Dipper is an asterism that is part of the greater constellation of Ursa Major. It contains seven stars that form a distinctive dipper-like shape. Because of its close proximity to the North Pole, the stars are seen most of the year by more than 50 percent of the world's population.

Stories of the Big Dipper date back to many ancient civilizations. Egyptian priests, for example, donned themselves in leopard robes symbolizing the night sky and held an adze in the shape of the Big Dip-

per when conducting ceremonies to release mummified bodies into the afterlife. From the Egyptian perspective, the constellation never disappeared from the night sky and thus symbolized eternity. In Nordic Viking culture, the people called it a wagon because it traveled around the sky; in China, it was the Emperor's chariot; in England it was known as a plough; while Hindus in India saw it as seven wise men. Even in the United States, Southern slaves who were traveling the Underground Railway "followed the drinking gourd" to guide them toward a free life in the North.

The Big Dipper: Compass, & Clock runs for a one-time show at 11 A.M. on April 12 at the Diana Wortham Theatre. Founded in 1988, Red Herring Puppets are based in Western North Carolina. They delight young audiences with their lively and informative "edutainment." For more information, contact the box office at dwttheatre.org, or 257.4530. For more on Red Herring Puppets and the Asheville Puppetry Alliance, visit ashevilledipperpuppetry.org.



THE STORIES

- A Chinese legend describes how K'uei, an ugly dwarf won the coveted Golden Rose for literature. But when the Emperor saw his face, he dropped the rose which shattered into pieces. Shamed, K'uei throws himself off a cliff only to be redeemed by Ao, the sea dragon who lifts him into the heavens to become one of the stars on the chariot of Wen Ch'ang, the God of Literature. This piece is performed with full-bodied marionettes with special stringing designed by Phil Huber.

- The classic Greek legend recounts the story of Callisto, a maiden in the service of Artemis who is tricked by Zeus. She gives birth to Arctus before Artemis turns her into a bear and thrusts her into the heavens. Zeus then transforms Arctus into the Little Bear so they can be together. This marionette show features several "trick" marionettes.

- Southern slaves sang a song called "Follow the Drinking Gourd" whose lyrics sheltered directions for the dangerous journey North to freedom by following the Big Dipper in the sky. A local black artist C.J. Randall has painted beautiful scrolling scenery that turns as the song verses describe the long journey. Cutout two-dimensional marionettes perform in front.

- A Micmac Indian legend tells the story of birds chasing a bear. From their high latitude in Northern Canada, some of the stars disappear in winter, and thus some of the birds fall away on the hunt. The bear is finally caught in the Fall when the leaves turn red and the "sky bear" has fallen on her back.