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Clan of the Giants

A look inside the OCF's famous parading puppets.

By Aleta Raphael-Brock

Ever wonder where those magnificent creatures that lead the afternoon parades through the dusty streets of the Oregon Country Fair come from? They've always embodied such mystery. You never really know who (or what) is inside or where those energetic and lively characters go when it's time to close up shop. It might be better for some to keep their mystery alive and know them only as Odo, the man of the fair, and Coyote, the mischievous canine that channels such excitement. Others might be too curious to stop there.

Puppeteer Jill Birmingham recalls children often looking up at her while she's in suit asking, "Are you real?" While inside she feels as real as she could possibly be. "They're magic, they're fantasy and they are real because when you wear them you become that character. They do become real," she says. Coyote is the most interesting puppet to operate because "you never know what he's gonna do," she says.

The giant puppets at the Oregon Country Fair started in the 1980s with the giant puppet group, Risk of Change. It was this group that bore Odo, the huge man with a yellow face and flowing colored ribbons. Birmingham joined Risk of Change in the '80s and later branched off with a group of four named The Illuminated Fools. Finally, she landed with Coyote Rising, the community puppet clan that she works with today.

Birmingham recalls the first time she supported a puppet on her back. "I put one on and that was that. We keep building puppets, we can't stop."

Birmingham works with Frank Anderson and the several other members of the group out of their red Takilma barn in rural southern Oregon to bring us the 20-foot characters that intrigue children and adults alike while heightening the fantastic theme of the fair. Their largest puppet making its debut this weekend is Ray Dance, a 20-foot sun with a 26-foot arm span and an 8-foot head. Also new to this year's fair is the River and Salmon parade that will celebrate the river from Coyote Rising's new home base of Chela Mela Meadow.

Coyote Rising will host pre-parade puppet workshops where people can try on the creatures and learn how to operate their arms at Chela Mela Meadow. They're constantly soliciting volunteers to wear the puppets in the parade. "You do sweat, but it's fun," says Birmingham about supporting the giants through the crowded dusty paths.

Constructed from mostly papier mâché, soft fabrics, and aluminum frames, the puppets often have to be operated by three or four people. They are well known at fairs and festivals all around the West Coast such as Burning Man and Cirque de Soiel. Just last month, Coyote Rising was hired by Horning's Hideout to build burnable effigies representing hate, ignorance, greed, and crooked politicians. After being paraded the puppets were burned in front to 5,000 people. "Now they're gone," said Birmingham with a hint of sadness. "But, we're hired to do weird things. The Country Fair we do because we love it."

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