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Bringing Rhea to life

Giant puppet to be new symbol of festive First Night Raleigh

The creators of Rhea, the new leader of this year's First Night People's Procession, hope their giant puppet rallies the crowd downtown to celebrate more than just the coming of a new year.

"We thought it would be a good way to celebrate North Carolina and its sort of wildness," said Donovan Zimmerman.

Not the wildness revelers indulge in on New Year's Eve, he said, but the natural wonders of the state.

Zimmerman and Jan Burger are the co-creators of Paperhand Puppet Intervention, which creates and stages plays with fanciful, oversize creatures of papier-mache and cloth. For Rhea, they drew inspiration from North Carolina's three regions, the mountains, the piedmont and the coast. They covered her torso and arms with detailed drawings of underwater ocean scenes, sand dunes, stars, mountain peaks, forests and portraits of the squirrels, turtles, birds and bees found there.

Rhea takes her name from the Greek mother goddess. She replaces another mythical being, Trigon the Dragon, which led the People's Procession since First Night began but had begun to wear out after 14 years of it. But Trigon will still be hanging around First Night this year. See him and an exhibit on the history of First Night at the Raleigh City Museum on Fayetteville Street.

The People's Procession caps an afternoon of First Night children's activities, and everyone is invited to march in the parade. Zimmerman says it will take at least 50 people to help move Rhea down the street.

"We need a lot of participants," he said. "Come on out and lend a hand and bring this huge celebration to life."

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Donovan Zimmerman, above, mixes paint in an old cotton dye warehouse in Saxapahaw. The space serves as a workshop where he and Paperhand Puppet Intervention co-creator Jan Burger make the giant puppets featured in the company's productions. Rhea's face, which will be 20 feet tall when finished, stares from behind him.

Staff Photos by Ted Richardson

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