

Lightwire illuminates classic stories at Wingate's Batte Center



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Photo courtesy of Lightwire Theater.

The magic of live theater usually starts in the dark. In productions of New Orleans-based Lightwire Theater, the lights stay off. As the audience's eyes acclimate to the darkness, 3D larger-than-life animals emerge, illuminated by rows of multi-colored, glow-in-the-dark tubing. The effect is created by a skilled dancer, dressed in black from head-to-toe. The results are breathtaking.

As the characters show their personalities and familiar plots unfold, audience members reimagine age-old tales through technology and movement for a modern-day storytelling experience.

Lightwire Theater will perform "The Tortoise and the Hare" and "The Ugly Duckling," on Sunday, March 22 at 3 p.m. at the Batte Center's McGee Theatre at Wingate University. Tickets range in price from \$6 to \$15.

In "The Tortoise and the Hare," the shelled reptile emerges victoriously as audience members are reminded of the familiar phrase, "Slow and steady wins the race." Though the moral of Aesop's fable is a universal truth, most people have more in common with the Hare, who is fast but prone to distractions by cell phones and television.

"The great thing about these stories is that everyone thinks they know them," said Lightwire Theater co-creator Ian Carney, who has taken the essence of both tales and added unexpected turns. In Hans Christian Andersen's "The Ugly Duckling," the main character becomes popular when others realize he is royalty. In this production, the duck earns his title.

"When the other animals exclude the ugly duckling, we can all relate to the mean kids in the lunch room," said Carney. "It's every John Hughes movie, where you know what it feels like to be an outsider."

Though Lightwire Theater is crafted to engage and entertain children, the production appeals to adults. Carney added references to 1980s movies and pop songs from the 1990s, such as MC Hammer's, "U Can't Touch This."

Carney has dedicated his life to performing art. He graduated from Tulane University with a Bachelor of Arts degree in English literature while performing with Ballet Hysell in New Orleans.

For three years, he danced the lead role and was a dance captain in Billy Joel and Twyla Tharp's Broadway musical "Movin' Out." There he met Lightwire Theatre co-creator, Corbin Popp, a professional dancer with a degree in biochemistry and a minor in physics.

“One day, Corbin brought in a piece of electroluminescent wire,” said Carney. “We started making miniature characters out of it and realized our imaginations could see them as being alive.”

The duo started creating life-sized characters that could be animated with choreography and dance. Then, they started telling stories using movement instead of words.



They created their first show, “DINO-LIGHT” in 2007, to critical acclaim. After generating two more productions, they were featured on the seventh season of “America’s Got Talent” and made it to the semifinals. Now, Lightwire Theater tours around the world.

“If we can teach kids to be interested in the theater, they will come back and one day bring their own children,” said Carney, who hopes he is creating his performance art can compete with video games.

“Lightwire has breathed new life into these classic enduring tales with cutting-edge technology,” said Director of Cultural Events Laura Kratt, who has programmed the Batte Center since 2011.

She became aware of Lightwire Theatre years ago, but had not tried shows geared toward children. Kratt booked Lightwire after a successful run of Eric Carle’s “The Very Hungry Caterpillar.”

When Kratt selects shows for each of the university’s three theaters, she tries to bring in something different and unique to augment the area’s artistic offerings. She looks for performers that will appeal to and challenge Wingate students, as well as audience members from Union County and beyond. She also works hard to increase access to the shows for younger students.

“There is great children’s theater being done in Charlotte, but the logistics of getting Union County children there can be a challenge,” she said.

With support from Union County Public Schools, Union Power Cooperative and WDAV, Kratt can provide extra performances for more than 1,500 first-grade students.

Kratt said, “I can’t wait to see the children’s faces!” – once her eyes adjust to the dark, that is. Visit www.battecenter.org to learn more or purchase tickets.