

SEAN CAWELTI IS ARTISTIC DIRECTOR of the increasingly active and visible Rogue Artists Ensemble, the talented offspring of UC Irvine's theatre program, following the great tradition of university-spawned acting companies like UCLA's alumni-created Actors' Gang and Buffalo Nights.

Unlike most nascent theatre companies who are all about acting, Cawelti says the Rogues were created by nine designers and a stage manager/fundraiser. The focus is not on great roles but what they refer to as hyper-theatre: utilizing multiple disciplines including digital video production, electronic media, puppetry and other under represented art forms. RAE is passionate about creating fully realized and meaningful theatre as the driving force behind each project.



Rogue Artists Register at Victorian Hotel

By Tom Provenzano

The current project is a collaboration with bizarre storyteller and artist Angus Oblong that follows the misadventures of a young couple who make the mistake of checking into a haunted inn. The idea for the partnership between the Rogues and Oblong came about when several company members became acquainted with a unique picture-story book.

"We got the Oblong book *Creepy Susan*," Cawelti says. "We read it and thought it would make a great play. The original idea being a musical taking these great stories exactly as written, not justifying them any more or less. We contacted Angus, immediately sensed a great partnership and looked at other dream projects he had.



SEAN CAWELTI

"*The Victorian Hotel* project stood out for him. It actually began as a Jim Henson television program. They optioned it and it ended up not being made and the rights went back to him and he optioned them to us."

The idea was perfect for the Rogue's desire to combine diverse aspects of theatre with an emphasis on puppetry. After earning his directing degree from UCI, Cawelti pursued graduate study in puppetry at NYU's Tisch School and has since designed puppets and masks for Cornerstone and International City Theatre among many others. Though he is not the main puppet designer on this show, his passion for the art form and his leadership of the company is essential to the creation of the project.

"As an ensemble we have a process where we come up with the rules of whatever world we are creating. For *The Victorian Hotel* world we had all these characters drawn by Angus, which could be left as cartoons through puppets, masks or projections. But who would be played by humans? We decided the rule was that human characters at hotel are live actors and everything else in the world would always be puppets. Mark Valdez, the director, has done a wonderful job injecting a Victorian farcical comedy element into the show and pushing it as if it were a cartoon—a lot of sight gags."

The Rogue Artists have become one of the most critically acclaimed new groups in the new century and they hope to continue in that vein. "We really just want to continue researching and exploring the type of hyper-theatre projects we are creating — combining all these different storytelling conventions in the hopes we can eventually tour them. Our productions are much more lavish in scale and design than a lot of 99-seat shows. Our goal is to reach folks who don't necessarily go to the theatre." The company is looking into touring clubs rather than traditional theatrical circuits as they hope to be a major force to define theatre for the 21st century. ■



THE VICTORIAN HOTEL

Plays Thurs.-Fri., 8 pm;
Sat., 2 and 8 pm; through Dec. 2
Tickets: \$25
Powerhouse Theatre
3116 2nd St., Santa Monica
866.OFF.MAIN or
www.thevictorianhotel-theplay.com