

## THEATER SCENE

## Celebrating the shortest day

By Web Behrens  
Special to the Tribune

Every holiday season, Chicagoan John Musial cozies up to a copy of Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," to remind himself of the true spirit of the holiday. "I try to do a reading of it, even if it's just to myself, because it puts you in the mood," says the multifaceted theater director/designer/filmmaker. But that's not the only annual tradition that excites Musial: He's also a longtime fan of Redmoon Theater's "Winter Pageant," a celebration of our coldest season, now in its 11th incarnation.

And this year, Musial, a Lookingglass Theatre ensemble member, curates the plainly titled "Pageant." Unlike some revivals that tell the same comforting tale year after year, Redmoon's non-religious tradition changes completely each time around. This year, the show tells the story of a mother and daughter who lose power in their apartment and set out on a journey to regain it, going everywhere from ComEd to City Hall to the magical Winter Queen. But no matter the theme, Redmoon always rejoices in this snowy time.

"It's my favorite show of the year," Musial smiles. "Every time I see it, it's the best. It's the right show for the right audience for the right reason, and that's the rarest of things. ... 'Winter Pageant' is about the community coming together and celebrating winter.

"I think it does a similar thing that 'Christmas Carol' does," he continues, referring to that classic's knack for raising people's spirits. The difference is that Redmoon's work is intentionally not connected to Christmas. "The 'Winter Pageant' is about the solstice," says Musial.

Indeed, as thousands of Chicagoans shop, feast and deck the halls with an eye towards Dec. 25, a small but growing number are turning their attention to a different day of significance: winter solstice, which this year falls on Saturday. It marks the occasion when the Northern Hemisphere experiences the shortest day of the year. (South of the equator, winter solstice arrives in June.)

"It's winter solstice for everybody," says veteran musician Michael Zerang, who, 12 years ago with colleague Hamid Drake, initiated a sunrise percussion concert to observe the end of the longest night. "Solstice just is. The season changes and it's the end of the year, and anybody can celebrate it."

Zerang and Drake began the show as a one-shot event, intended primarily for family and friends. Word of mouth spread and interest quickly grew; in 1992 they began adding additional performances. The sell-out shows have grown so popular, to mark their 10th anniversary two years back, the duo played 10 shows over 10 days. This year, they've scaled back to three, Saturday through Monday mornings at Links Hall.

"A lot of people aren't affiliated with any organized religion; they don't follow Christmas or Hanukkah or Kwanzaa or whatever else happens," Zerang explains. "If you're outside of that, maybe you feel left out—so to open [the concerts] up to people was really a way for us to include those who don't have formal celebrations."

Because their "ritual concerts" begin at such a 6 a.m. ("I like to say it's the only show in town," Zerang laughs), audiences get a unique experience. The Links Hall Studio is candlelit when the pair of percussionists begins playing. "People are in still somewhat of a dream state," Zerang says. "They're very open and receptive. I can really feel that." During the 75 minutes or so that the duo plays structured-improv rhythms, the sun "transforms [the space] from darkness into light. In that sense, there's ritual."

Because wintertime is so full of darkness, "winter energy—the energy of emptiness, of having nothing, of death—is the

most difficult energy for most people," says Blanche Blacke, artistic director of Shakura Ensemble Ritual Theatre, which will perform their multi-media "Cycles of Life" today and Saturday. The performance piece, which features the Dineh Tah Navajo Dancers of New Mexico, "is all about the seasons," Blacke says. "It begins and ends with winter. ... We intend to clear the energy; to make it empty for winter, in order to open up the seed of spring. You can't have one without the other."

Although these events transcend organized religion, the artists are striving to create with their audiences a connection, not unlike what many experience at church or temple. "I find a spiritual element always when I'm playing music," says Zerang. "It's a communion with other people.... It's very important for us, as artists and musicians, to put out some positive energy that will hopefully resonate somewhere in the world."

Redmoon's "Winter Pageant" runs through Dec. 29 at Pulaski Park Fieldhouse, 1419 W. Blackhawk. \$10-12. 773-389-9031; Winter Solstice Percussion Concerts are 6 a.m. Saturday through Monday at Links Hall Studio, 3435 N. Sheffield. \$15 (\$13 in advance at Bookworks, 3444 N. Clark Street). 773-281-0824 or 773-871-5318; "Cycles of Life" on Friday and Saturday at Northside College Prep Auditorium, 5501 N. Kedzie. \$10-\$22. 773-743-7372.