

STAGE

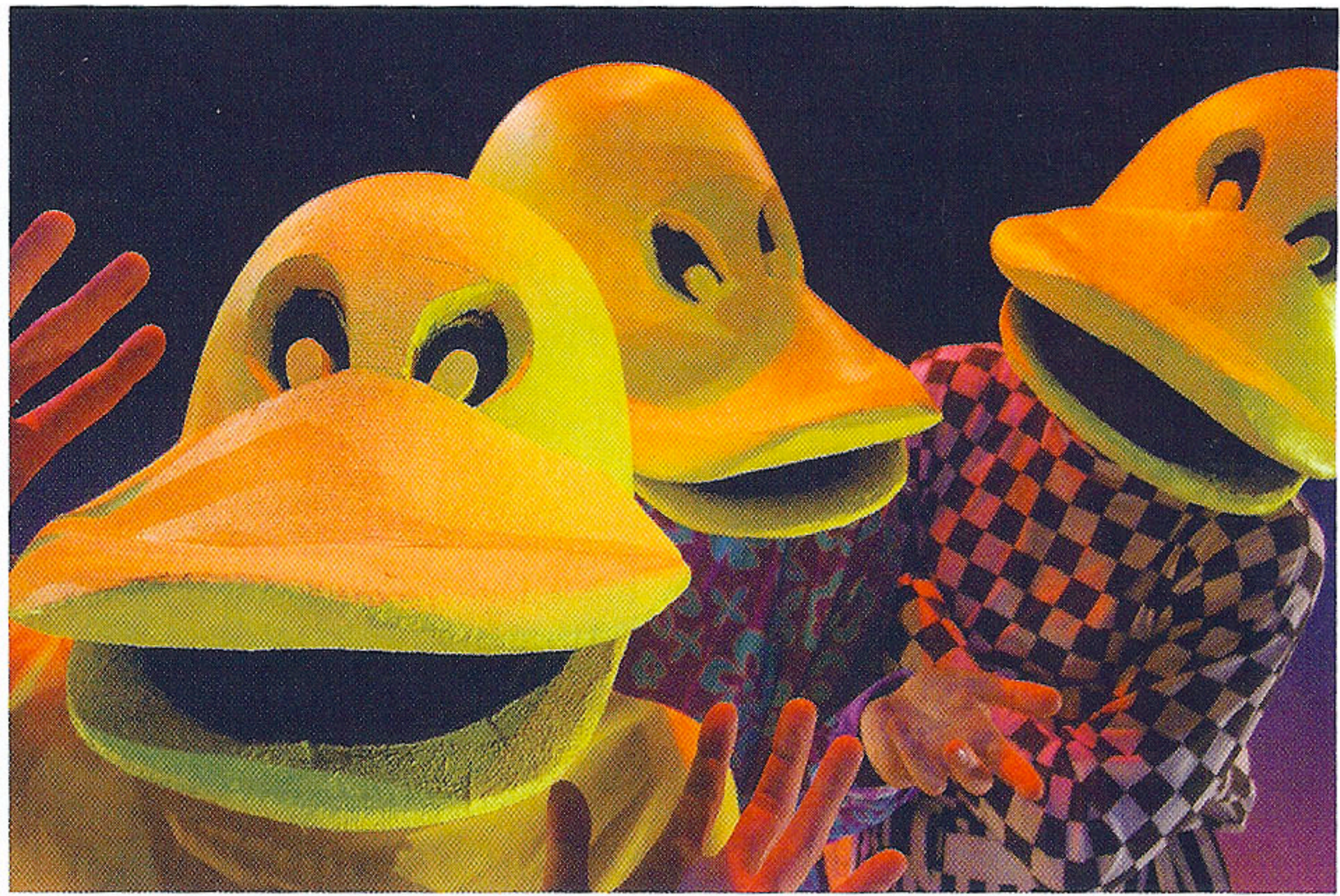
THEATER IN MOTION

*Imago Theatre's Jerry Mouawad brings movement and magic to stages from Portland to New York.*

A TRIO OF IMPRISONED RACCOONS stages a jailbreak. A passel of penguins plays a game of musical chairs. These critters and others — including rabbits, anteaters, butterflies, polar bears, hippos, fish, and, yes, even ducks — may not seem like promising subjects for theater, but each year, thousands of adults and children crowd into Portland's Imago Theatre to gaze and guffaw at the wordless wonders of *Frogz* and its new companion, *Biglittlethings*, some of the most popular yet innovative theatrical spectacles ever to come out of Oregon. Since 1986, *Frogz* has played twenty to thirty theaters across the nation every year, performed in Asia and Europe, been to Broadway and back twice, and grossed over half a million dollars last year alone. The theater has won national acclaim and grants from prestigious sources such as the National Endowment for the Arts.

Maybe Imago's affinity for animal antics shouldn't be surprising, since its cofounder and artistic director, Jerry Mouawad, is a Duck. Mouawad grew up in Virginia, then moved to Portland in 1974, entering the University as an undeclared major the next year. "A lot of my inspiration came from watching great actors at the UO," Mouawad says. He was also drawn to nontraditional theater. "I took some classes and started realizing there was this whole world of 'movement theater' out there," he recalls. He took dance classes, acted in Robinson Theatre productions, and developed an interest in makeup and stage design.

But after two years at the UO, Mouawad was still searching for direction. "I liked a lot of what was going on there," he says, "but I didn't know what my forte was." Back in Portland for the summer, he flipped through the phone book under "theater" and found a private school taught by Richard Hayes Marshall, who was doing "strange work with masks," Mouawad remembers. "I saw him perform in a mask and in ten seconds, he'd entered this other world right before my eyes. It was magic, really — transformation." Rather than starting with a storyline, Marshall would ask his



*Wildly costumed Imago Theatre characters create magic on stage.*

students to start with the space, then focus on a character's movements, and go from there."

In Marshall's class, Mouawad met another student, Carol Triffle, who would become his theatrical and romantic collaborator. Mouawad and Triffle set their ideas in motion on Portland stages for the next decade, first with Tears of Joy puppet theatre, then forming their own company, which became Imago in the mid-1980s. They chose the term — Latin for "image" — because it "sounded good, looked good, and it was ambiguous," Mouawad explains. "Ambiguity is a lot of what we do."

They wrote a number of original works that Mouawad describes as a "cross between existentialism and the circus," shaped by an artistic vision of the nature of movement.

"We've come to look at the entire world and its events as movement," Mouawad says, "and like a writer who sees structure and content and character and converts that analysis to words, we look at space and rhythm and interaction and dynamics and use that to create great theater."

Those ideas inform Imago's breakthrough success, *Frogz* — a dozen or so short skits featuring various animals or other fanciful creatures acting out strange, often hilarious scenes that "explore the human condition through use of masks [and] the way we as humans anthropomorphize animals and see ourselves as animals," Mouawad says. No

words are spoken, but the costumes, lighting, sound, music, and movement combine to create a series of compelling images that appeal as much to children as to adults — a rare combination of family-friendly fun and artistic innovation.

A sort of sequel to *Frogz* called *Biglittlethings* debuted this past December. Since February, the show has been on a national tour that will run through April.

*Frogz* also gave Imago the financial resources to purchase the venue they had previously rented, a three-story former Masonic Temple in Southeast Portland that now holds a 200-seat theater and space for rehearsals, offices, and costume and prop design and construction.

"*Frogz* has subsidized all our experimentation," Mouawad admits. One such experiment is a production of Sartre's *No Exit*, which the busy theater will reprise this March. The actors are suspended above the stage on an unbalanced platform; each time a character enters or moves, the others must shift to keep the platform balanced — a physical representation of their dramatic relationships. "In some ways it was like the work I learned at the UO [studying the 'method' acting guru] Stanislavsky — method, motivation, history of the characters," Mouawad explains. "But at the same time, we do exactly the opposite stuff: physical awareness of space, rhythm of the play, rhythm of character. I'm constantly trying to find both worlds."

— BRETT CAMPBELL MS '96