

Los Angeles Times

F18 FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 27, 1992

STAGE BEAT

'Icons' a Challenging Adult Puppet World

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SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

Puppetry is consigned in most minds to children's theater, but there's a whole adult world of puppet theater that has broken free of folk art and cleverly, elegantly expanded the form.

The latest example is "Icons and Other Strangers" by the newly formed Los Angeles Puppet Artists Collective at the Carpet Company Stage. The show's coordinator, Lisa Sturz, believes that "puppets are mediators [that can] act as powerful messengers between the conscious and unconscious." That's true in this case but, happily, it's only half the story. The rest is a joyous, comical, dramatically pointed pleasure.

In the Gypsy tale "The Witch's Egg," interpreted by Christine Papalexis, a little girl—whose arms are made of scissors—learns to trust her instincts through an encounter with marionettes made of scrap iron, bones and assorted kitchenware. It's mysterious while wryly forging a link between the spirit world and the mundane.

In Sturz's "Life After Death," the ancient art of shadow puppetry is used to challenge the role of the Great Mother figure in a stark, introspective piece about the emotions a woman goes through in an abortion.

Francois Manavit's "Dogs" is a frolicsome romp through Paris parks, and Rob Secrest's "Feets of Fright" is a hilarious fantasy in which weird, bright shapes squiggle and squirm against a black-lit stage.

Unobtrusive black-garbed puppeteers guide the animate/inanimate objects that, in their phantasmagoria, convey a kind of "Cirque Du Soleil" magic.

Puppets can make you uncomfortable, too. Even uneasy. In Ted Lamoureux's old lady sketch, "Two Sisters," a paean to human fragility goes on much too long in its garish screwing on and unscrewing of monstrously wrinkled heads.

■ "Icons and Other Strangers," Carpet Company Stage, 5262 W. Pico Blvd., Los Angeles. Thursdays-Sundays, 8 p.m. Ends Dec. 13. \$10. (213) 222-82891. Running time: 1 hour, 15 minutes.