

Kids of all ages will 'Swoon!' over Strange Fruit

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Love comes in all shapes, hues and sizes. Still, Australia's Strange Fruit, a performance group from Down Under, takes love to a new level, presenting "Swoon!" a piece on the ups and downs of romantic love, 14 feet off the ground, in vivid, quirky costumes.

The extraordinary visit from Australia's Strange Fruit will include 14 performances and a theater workshop for kids by the globe-trotting, Melbourne-based performance company -- all free. It is the centerpiece of the Family Fun Festival, a summerlong smorgasbord of free activities for families in Millennium Park.

"Swoon!" will make hearts go pitter-pat no matter how old the viewer, with four performers lashed at the waist to tall apparatuses anchored so close to the Cloud Gate sculpture, also known as "the Bean," that they will be able to see their reflections.

"This fits in perfectly with [the park's] style of family programming, an artistic, acrobatic spectacle for all ages. Everyone will engage with this," says Jack McLarnan, program associate for Millennium Park.

Originally inspired by the way wheat waves in the wind, the 14-year-old troupe presents tableaux on various topics that are part mime, part slapstick, part high-flying acrobatics, performed out in the open on long -- very long! -- flexible poles that sway over the crowd. "Swoon!" spends 20 minutes or so considering the vagaries of love, backed by music that includes works by Puccini, Mozart and the Australian composer Paul Healy, as well as interpretations by Frank Sinatra.

The show is "totally seductive and mesmerizing, a very charming performance that gets you from the get-go," says Laura Colby, director of Elsie Management, which represents Australia's Strange Fruit in North America. "Even climbing up the poles is part of the performance."

Says McLarnan, "This combination of physical beauty and technical innovation really gels with what the park is about," to bring "something really original in terms of art to the people of Chicago and visitors."

Besides putting on two or three shows per day during the run, Australia's Strange Fruit will present its signature "Running With the Bulls" workshop for school-age children, 4½ years and older. The workshop combines dance and assorted circus arts in a series of theater games that takes off from one child's story, which the group will choose.

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The Family Fun Festival will offer two other big performances this summer, with family entertainer Justin Roberts slated to perform on July 20 and a "special secret extravaganza concert" in the works for Sept. 1, McLarnan says.

The festival, headquartered in a big tent that will have twice the space of last year's Family Fun Festival tent, will serve all summer long as an "oasis in the park that's really made for kids," McLarnan says.

Wiggleworms, the music program for preschoolers from the Old Town School of Folk Music, will be in residence at the festival. A reading circle will be stocked with books for everyone from "tiny kids to adolescents," with story times many days at 11 a.m., McLarnan says. A building zone will offer 11,000 wooden building blocks. A tumbling zone will have jump ropes, Hula-Hoops and other toys for active fun in an enclosed space. Kids will often find "make and take" craft activities in the tent, overseen by area museums.

"This year, we are trying to appeal to all ages," McLarnan says.