



Manual Cinema immerses audiences in narrative experiences that also call attention to the mechanics of the art form. (Photography by Megan E. Doherty, AM'05, PhD'10)

## No strings attached

BY MEGAN E. DOHERTY, AM'05, PHD'10 | UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO MAGAZINE | MAR-APR/13

Manual Cinema turns shadow puppetry into a cinematic experience.

I took off my shoes and ducked into a tent of white sheets, propped up in the center of a room. It was the kind of fort you might have built as a kid. I waited. Out of the silence came the recorded sound of a heart beating. Light, shadow, and color were projected onto the sheets all around. This was the final fall-quarter project of five College students working with the shadow-puppet troupe [Manual Cinema](#), a University ensemble in residence.

Shadow puppetry is thought to have begun more than 2,000 years ago, during ancient China's Han dynasty. Emperor Wu was devastated by the loss of a beloved concubine. One of his subjects made a figure from leather in the shape of the dead woman and, behind an illuminated screen, made her silhouette move as if she were alive again.

Manual Cinema updates this tradition by creating shows that look and feel like a film projection. The puppets—made of paper, measuring only a few inches tall—are manipulated on the flat surface of overhead projectors; their movements come to life on screen in front of an audience. Meanwhile, props and live actors moving behind the screen appear as silhouettes the same size as the projections, which they interact with.

Since its start in 2010, the experimental multimedia collective has explored the boundaries between cinema and live theater, puppetry and reality. During their yearlong residency, sponsored by the University's Theater and Performance Studies program, they produced a show and taught a class.

Manual Cinema is composed of Drew Dir and Sarah Fornace, both AB'07; Ben Kauffman, AB'09; Julia Miller; and Kyle Vegter. The group launched after Fornace and Miller, both puppeteers and choreographers, worked together at the Redmoon Theater, an experimental theater in Chicago. There they had their first taste of what could be created out of paper cut-outs, acetate, and an overhead projector. Miller and Fornace crossed paths on Redmoon's shadow puppet version of *Swan Lake* with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. Afterward, the two were hungry for a new project.

Dir, a puppeteer, playwright, and director, and musicians and composers Vegter and Kauffman, joined them for *The Ballad of Lula del Ray*, a 20-minute piece using only one projector. Lyrical and dreamlike, it told the story of a girl's journey from her desert satellite array to the city and beyond. Designed as a one-off for an experimental puppetry festival, the show was so well received that the troupe decided to keep going.

Since then, they've created three feature-length live-scored cinematic puppet shows, performing at venues including the Poetry Foundation in Chicago and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. They've also been commissioned to produce pieces for the University of Chicago, the Logan Square Arts Center, and contemporary music ensemble eighth blackbird.

Among its influences, the group cites the films *Vertigo* and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, as well as work from Pixar, Jean-Luc Godard, and Wes Anderson. In 2011 Manual Cinema created *Ada/Ava*, a two-projector production invoking New England gothic and exploring the surreal horror of death and loss and the lengths one might go to see lost loved ones again. In 2012 the group collaborated with Portland, Oregon, poet Zachary Schomburg on *Fjords*, for which Vegter composed 14 pieces, each inspired by a Schomburg poem.

During their UChicago residency, Manual Cinema revamped *Lula del Ray* into a feature-length cinematic narrative. Performed in fall 2012, the show used three overhead projectors, 140 sound effects, and more than 200 handmade puppets, cut with an X-Acto knife from railroad board or card stock.

Manual Cinema's total effect, Vegter says, often leaves audiences wondering how to take in what they're experiencing. "You're paying attention to the narrative and consuming it like you would a film, but the entire time you're aware that we're doing this live." Adds Miller: "There's a moment where they forget that they were watching a puppet show, and then a moment that triggers something where they ask, 'How is that happening?' The audience is working when they're watching the show; they're not passive." That audience questioning of the artistic mechanism at work is exactly what Manual Cinema's artists want.

Cue the sheet fort.

A small-scale version of a project Manual Cinema plans to do in a much bigger way, "the fort show seems to have the ability to transform space," Fornace says. "My dream idea is it being in an industrial warehouse. And you go inside and see this giant, glowing sheet fort. ... So the structure itself is a piece of art too."