My Day at the Museum

BY DIEP TRAN

The performance-art team at L.A.'s Natural History Museum mixes science and theatre to bring prehistoric creatures back to life

I'M STANDING IN THE BELLY OF A T. REX.

No, I have not somehow traveled back in time or wandered into Jurassic Park. It's actually a realistic, 14-foot puppet of a baby tyrannosaurus rex, weighing 73 pounds, with movable head, arms and legs.

Outside, Brian Meredith, one of the creature's puppeteers, is coaching me in the art of dino-walking.

"That mechanism controls the head," he says, referring to a cube-shaped handle in front of me. "If you extend your fingers forward, there's a bicycle brake and it makes his mouth open." I pull, and sure enough, the mouth of the T. rex opens, revealing the floor and some little legs.

"You have an entire crowd of children just fascinated right now," quips Peter Wylie, manager of the performing arts department at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, where this prehistoric adventure is taking place. No doubt it's a strange sight, a moving T. rex head with a pair of human legs dangling from its stomach.

"Do you want to make him roar?" asks Meredith, excited like a kid showing off a new toy. Sure, since I've gotten this far. He hands me a headset that is wired to an amplifier close to the head of the dinosaur. "This is the mike—put it around your head. Now just give him a roar." I growl into the microphone and the distorted sound that comes out is primal and surprisingly frightening. Then again, maybe this is Jurassic Park...

"There you go! You made a kid run, well done," Meredith exclaims. "Once you've made your first kid run away, then you're hooked."

Visitors to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County will see a large banner in front of the 1913 Building on Exposition Boulevard advertising Dinosaur Encounters. These are 20-minute plays—performed around 30 times a week, depending on the season—that use puppets to teach children about prehistoric animal behavior.

Yet these dino representations aren't hand puppets or models on sticks that can be touched and prodded by little kids. They are, in fact, three-life-sized mechanical creatures, made of fabric, controlled by one or two puppeteers each and set into action as part of a performance narrative. There are two juvenile dinosaurs—a nine-year-old tyrannosaurus rex and a six-year-old triceratops—and a female saber-toothed cat ("It's a cat, not a tiger," Wylie reminds me numerous times).

"Telling someone about this job doesn't do it justice," suggests Meredith, "because everybody thinks these dinosaurs are Barney." But, unlike the cartoonish Barney, these fellows look like they might take a bite out of any unlucky visitor who walks by.

DINOSAUR ENCOUNTERS AND ITS SPIN-OFF, ICE Age Encounters, are shows that mix educational programming, puppet theatre and children's theatre. The topics of discussion include comparative anatomy, paleontology and the interaction of science and art. Wylie describes the pieces as "Paleo-poetry." "We're making just enough up so we don't piss off the paleontologist upstairs," he says with a chuckle.

A lot of our shows have been written to coincide with the theories and information from the Dinosaur Hall." He's referring to the museum's popular wing of dinosaur bones, which just opened in 2011.
There are currently seven short plays in the museum's repertoire. To keep things interesting, and to keep the audience abreast of the latest scientific discoveries, new plays are frequently generated in-house by the museum's performance team. The Natural History Museum is one of only a handful of U.S. institutions that house a performance art staff, using theatre as a teaching tool for science. The word “edu-tainment” gets thrown around frequently. “That term makes my skin crawl,” Wylie complains with a grin—but he also acquiesces. “The plays should be both theatrical and educational. They should be inspiring and exciting, and maybe youngsters will walk away with one or two facts they didn’t have access to before.”

A case in point: The young T. rex had feathers! I learn this while seated in the Age of Mammals Hall, amongst small children and taxidermic mammals. In this particular show, How to Think Like a “Scientist!” performer Ilana Turner describes T. rex anatomy to a rapt, occasionally raucous audience of 30-some children.

“My imagination created this T. rex with what are called proto-feathers,” she tells them, pointing to the moving, growling dinosaur that moments before was chasing her around the room. “Scientists believe the T. rex may have had such feathers on their bodies. They found evidence of it in skin imprint fossils.”

I’d like to fill him in on what I’ve learned: The tyrannosaurus and the triceratops were constructed in 2008 by Erth Visual & Physical Inc., an Australian theatre company that uses larger-than-life puppets in its performances. The museum’s puppets were brought in as plushy replacements for the specimens in the Dinosaur Hall, which was closed at the time. The impetus behind their inception, according to Su Oh, director of education and programs, was the desire to make paleontology more exciting and accessible.

“These creatures walked the Earth at one time, and theatrics is a way to get that feeling across,” Oh explains. “We want people to be emotionally excited about things in science, and then they pursue the subject more deeply.”

But the road to theatre is not always smoothly paved. As originally conceived, the Encounters show had the dinosaurs following the museum guides around as they improvised content. “They didn’t have any improv training, so they were just talking—and the shows were a half-hour long, which for a kindergartner was not going to work!” says creative content and curriculum developer Jen Bloom, who was hired in 2008 to help streamline the creative process.

Bloom, who regularly climbs into the triceratops, is a co-founder of Santa Monica Rep. “Early on, there was a lot of using Wikipedia, and there wasn’t any open col-
laboration. So there was a lot of resentment towards us entertainers on the part of the scientists, because the kids would be like, "Bones, bones, bones... PUPPETS!"

To facilitate better learning, formalized scripts were introduced, along with theatrical basics such as lights, sounds, costumes, and a small stage in the middle of the mammal hall. All scripts are now sent to various departments in the museum for fact-checking. The performance art staff has grown from 3 to 13, a mix of full-time and part-time staffers who are actors, stunt performers and aerialists. They take turns interacting with the puppets, climbing into them and operating tech during the shows.

These developments have been paralleled by a steady increase in audience numbers. In 2010–11, around 180,000 people had animal encounters. And the team has branched out into other departments of the museum—during spring and fall, they don insect costumes and multi-legged puppets for *Hop, Slither, and Stalk!*, short plays about critters from contemporary times.

“We’re working and developing and playing,” says Wylie. Are there new puppets in the works? “We might come up with a full-suit puppet, or it might be a rod puppet. I would love having something that T. rex could chase and try to eat!”

Later, I take a seat next to the saber-toothed cat, a recent addition created by Jim Henson’s Creature Shop, while performer Betsy Zajko strips down to a skin-tight black outfit and goes through some upper-body stretches. Zajko, a member of L.A.’s Rogue Machine Theatre, is a part-time quadruped puppeteer, meaning she climbs inside the four-legged triceratops and the saber-toothed cat. She also served as the model for the cat.

“They built it on my body—there’s a full-body mold of me in quadruped position still at the Creature Shop,” Zajko says proudly. During the show, Zajko’s legs are encased inside the cat’s hind-legs and her arms grip stilts located in the forelimbs; the position allows her to move around in the 70-pound furry suit. The animatronic head in this puppet—with blinking eyes, moving jaw and feline sounds—is controlled by a remote, handled by a second puppeteer. I ask Zajko what it’s like performing inside the creature.

“The job description says ‘claustrophobic.’ It’s dark. It’s a small confined space with a limited amount of oxygen and no visibility,” she responds. The shows require the performers to be precisely blocked, and some hit their marks by memorizing the patterns on the carpet. It’s highly physical acting. “When I’m in the puppet, I think like a cat. I’m a mother cat, and where’s my baby?”

The baby in question is a marionette puppet christened Nibbles. During an *Ice Age Encounters* installment about hunting habits, Nibbles nuzzles against its mom. The audience of children and their parents erupts in a chorus of “Awww” at the display of affection.

For the performance-art team, that’s what makes the experience special: the kids’ reactions, which range from screams of fright to cascades of questions about animal behavior.

“I see these kids have a visceral experience—I see them making an emotional connection,” Bloom declares. “Ultimately I don’t care if they get all those facts, I just want them to have that.”