

Photo provided

Lightwire Theater uses electroluminescent puppetry to tell the stories of "The Ugly Duckling & The Tortoise and the Hare" on Saturday at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage.

Inspired by the wire

Mendel show will feature theater company's 'electroluminescent puppetry'

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
HP Features Writer

BENTON HARBOR — Show, don't tell.

After struggling to find the words to describe Lightwire Theater's mix of dance, puppetry and luminescence, Eleanor Carney had the idea to do just that. The result landed her, dance partner and husband Ian Carney, and their company a semi-final spot on the TV competition show "America's Got Talent" in 2012.

"I thought maybe if we put our art in front of millions of people they might get it," Eleanor Carney says by telephone while traveling through Indiana. "We just wanted to put it out there and to be able to share it."

The exposure seems to have worked. Lightwire Theater, in conjunction with Corbian Visual

IF YOU GO

- ▶ **WHAT:** Lightwire Theater presents "The Ugly Duckling & The Tortoise and the Hare"
- ▶ **WHEN:** 11 a.m. Saturday
- ▶ **WHERE:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor
- ▶ **HOW MUCH:** \$15, \$18 and \$22
- ▶ **CONTACT:** 927-1221 or www.lmcmastage.org
- ▶ **ARTIST INFO:** lightwiretheater.com

Arts and Dance, have built three more shows using cutting-edge technology, moving sculpture and dance since appearing on "America's Got Talent." These include

"The Ugly Duckling & The Tortoise and the Hare," appearing Saturday morning at the Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage.

Hans Christian Andersen's tale of the ugly duckling who becomes a beautiful swan, and Aesop's fable about the time-tested adage "slow and steady wins the race," will be told using electroluminescent puppetry. Silent, life-sized puppets are worn and operated by performers who dance to music ranging from pop to jazz to classical. The glowing character outlines are created by using EL wire, which is powered by batteries and used mostly to illuminate walkways, signs and instrument panels on cars.

For those who missed the ensemble's TV appearances, Carney

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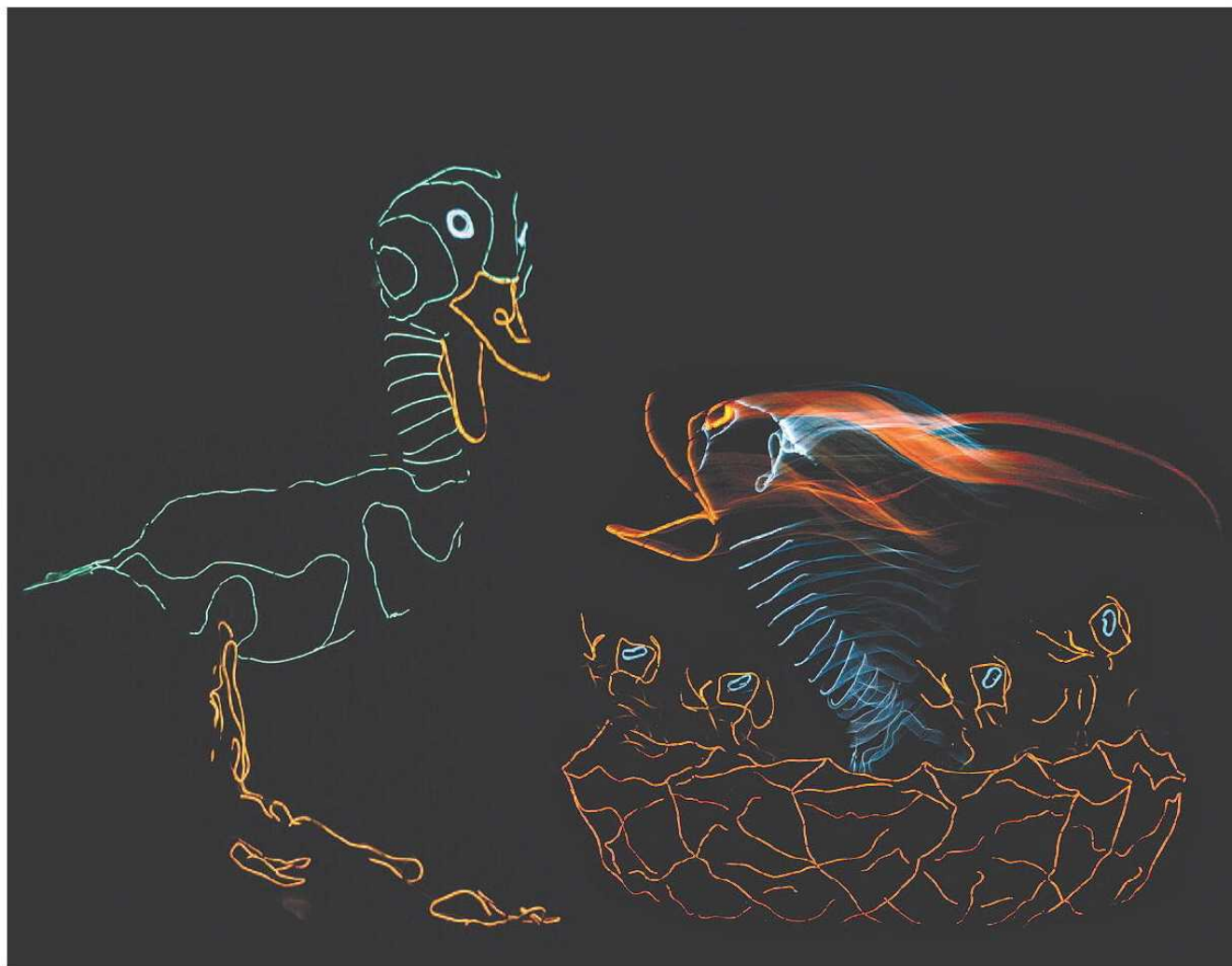


Photo provided

Lightwire Theater's dancers wear and operate electroluminescent wire, whose colors can be dimmed, brightened or changed to help convey emotions.

LIGHTWIRE

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describes the wire as having “the consistency of half-cooked spaghetti.”

The idea to use EL wire came when Corbin Popp showed the material to Ian Carney. Both were dancing in Twyla Tharp’s Broadway show “Movin’ Out” and began experimenting with the material, building rudimentary versions of Professor Henslow and Darwin, the two main characters in their first show, “Darwin the Dino-

saur,” which has since been renamed “Dino-Light.” With the help of their wives, Eleanor Carney and Whitney Popp, who is also a dancer, and a Jim Henson Foundation Grant, they began to build the rest of their puppetry-based creatures.

“It was really the wire that influenced us,” Eleanor Carney says. “When we started playing around with it we thought it was really interesting that you could erase the dancer. We never considered ourselves puppeteers because we were dancers, but now we are

not only dancers and puppeteers but technicians because we build everything ourselves.”

With the success of “Dino-Light,” and their “America’s Got Talent” run, Lightwire Theater created “The Ugly Duckling & The Tortoise and the Hare” in 2012.

“We like to say it’s a modern twist on two classic tales because we do put our stamp on it,” Carney says.

What makes the show different than other shows with black lights or other computer-based light technologies is how the dancers

incorporate and use the EL wire.

“The technology is cool because all of our characters are operated by the dancer, by the performer,” Carney says. “We have the ability to dim our characters to change colors manually so when the performer wants to convey an emotion they can dim or brighten their costume. You can do a lot with just movement but the ability to add color or dim and brighten really does play a part in conveying emotion. I think that’s an important tool in our shows.”

Although it may be labeled as a children’s show, Carney says the theatrical experience isn’t limited to just children and their parents.

“Our greatest reward is when we see parents and adults laughing alongside the kids,” she says. “That’s when we know we’ve delivered. What our mission has really become is to bring people to the theater and show them something that they’ve not experienced before and make them fall in love or back in love with theater.”

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